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WHADDYA WANT? IT'S CONEY ISLAND!: TOURISM, PLAY AND MEMORY IN
THE ILLEGIBLE CITY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

By
Elizabeth Healy Matassa
B.A., the University of Delaware, 2003
May 2006

The city of Sophronia is made up of two half-cities. In one there is the great roller coaster with its steep humps, the carousel with its chain spokes, the Ferris wheel of spinning cages, the death-ride with crouching motorcyclists, the big top with the clump of trapezes hanging in the middle. The other half-city is of stone and marble and cement, with the bank, the factories, the palaces, the slaughterhouses, the school, and all the rest.

One of the half-cities is permanent, the other is temporary, and when the period of its sojourn is over, they uproot it, dismantle it, and take it off, transplanting it to the vacant lots of another half-city.

And so every year the day comes when the workmen remove the marble pediments, lower the stone walls, the cement pylons, take down the Ministry, the monument, the docks, the petroleum refinery, the hospital, load them on trailers, to follow from stand to stand their annual itinerary. Here remains the half-Sophronia of the shooting-galleries and the carousels, the shout suspended from the cart of the headlong roller coaster, and it begins to count the months, the days it must wait before the caravan returns and a complete life can begin again.

-Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972).

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Abstract

In the post-industrial American city, the question of what urban space means seems far less important than how it is lived through the dynamic struggles of city dwellers to claim these spaces as their own. These struggles to define urban space are not always overtly political and thus must be examined through the more everyday, sometimes unconscious practices of city dwellers. This thesis attempts to valorize the emotional work of cities through an ethnographic study of Coney Island, Brooklyn. Coney Island is examined first as an urban space which allows tourists to move beyond traditional practices of visual consumption, then as a unique public space of playful bodies and finally, as a space of remembering where absence in the built landscape allows visitors to insert their own imaginings. Through a proliferation of everyday practices and imaginings in less regulated city spaces like Coney Island, established meanings of the city are challenged and reconstructed. City dwellers subvert the aesthetic rationality of the planned city through their sensory experience. Thus, the textual city becomes illegible.

Chapter 1

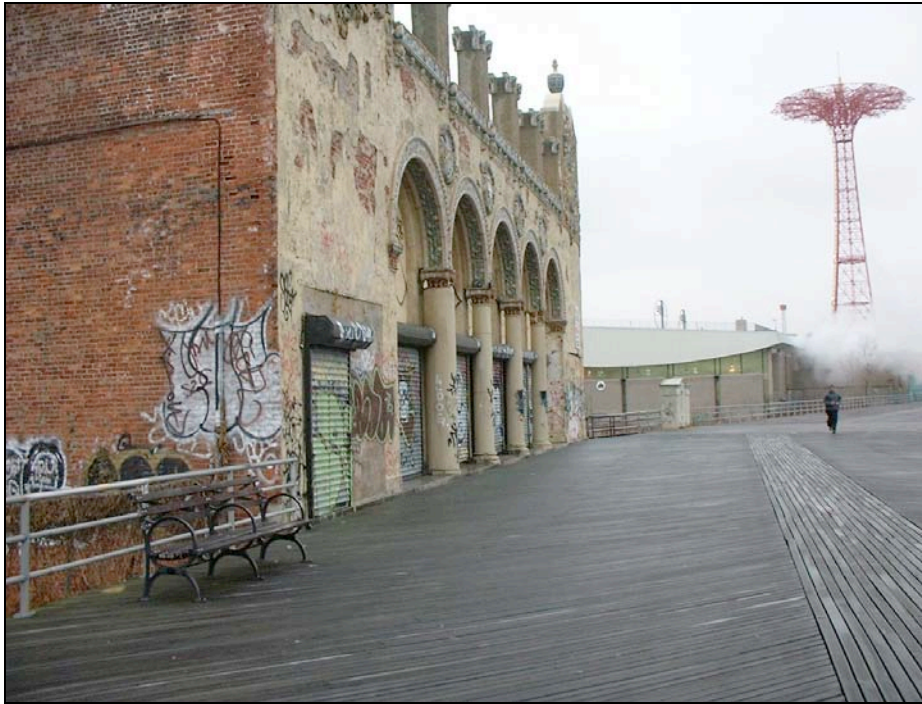
Introduction

“Savage ‘N’ Peaches”

I first visited Coney Island in the summer of 2003 but in some ways it felt like a homecoming. As a kid growing up two hours south, in Wilmington, Delaware, much of my life was shaped by summertime trips to the Jersey Shore and wintertime trips to New York City. These places became the bookends of my own imaginative geography, ephemeral worlds that I longed someday to permanently inhabit, dreading the long car ride back home. So when I moved to New York City after graduating from college, my first excursion to the “outer” boroughs (as Queens, the Bronx and Brooklyn are often referred to) was to Coney Island. As the lonely Ferris wheel rose from the city’s edge, I felt a familiar longing for the Jersey boardwalk and the kind of ache that always fills me when I think about the city and am once again overwhelmed by the number of lives any person can lead.

That day I wandered down to the end of the boardwalk and happened upon the Childs Restaurant building, one of the last remaining structures from 1920s Coney Island. The building was wrapped in graffiti but one phrase stood out: “Savage ‘N’ Peaches 5-18-79.” Two years before my birth, Savage and Peaches had come to Coney Island and I could only imagine who they were and what their affair had been like: messy and passionate no doubt, and filled with long train rides out to Coney. I was reminded of the power of wandering the city and the ways that forgotten voices and secret histories continually rise to greet us out of an urban fabric that is never completely contained in its

architecture or by the struggles of urban authorities to render its meanings non-negotiable. The next time I returned to Coney the fragment of Savages and Peaches' story had been whitewashed from the building. But soon, new voices crept up in its place.



Childs Restaurant building

Much of the current literature bemoans the loss of the “urban” in the post-industrial American city (Sorkin 1992, Boyer 1994). The city, it seems, has been invaded by suburban mentalities, becoming an image driven caricature of itself fueled by tourist spectacle and financial profit. It is argued that this suburbanization of the city threatens to cleanse urban spaces of their formerly public quality, failing to teach us how to negotiate social and racial differences (Echekowitz 2001, Mitchell 2003).

Coney Island tells a different story. As one woman I interviewed questioned, “Why does Coney Island inspire us still? Against all of that [surveilled, suburbanized space]. It does, you know, there’s something...and people really need that.” So why does Coney inspire us still? I’m not so sure. Perhaps it remains an outpost of urban-ness in a city given over to the suburban. Perhaps in Coney Island lies our desire to return to the city in all its sensual difference and inconsistencies. For it is these qualities that let us explore different ways to be in the city, and more importantly, different ways to be together.

The majority of writing on Coney Island has fallen into two categories: historical accounts of Coney’s heyday as the world’s greatest amusement park and journalistic accounts lamenting the decline of the neighborhood, likening it to a kind of loss of American innocence. Cinematically, Coney has been appropriated as an image of urban dystopia, a marginal space inhabited by the underbelly of the city where urban problems are endemic and untreatable (*The Warriors* 1979, *Requiem for a Dream* 2000). In all of these constructions the Coney Island of the present is rendered irrelevant, marginalized as a space which no longer has anything to tell us. In the words of urbanist Sharon Zukin, Coney Island has become “a landscape whose time has passed” (1998:649). Surprisingly little has been written about Coney as it exists today, in spite of the fact that for many working class city dwellers it remains a principal summertime vacation destination. Although few critical examinations of present-day Coney Island have been written, some historical works allude to Coney’s continuing power as an urban place. “The lingering charge of Coney’s kinetic carnival,” writes Michael Immerso, “[is] too potent to be

dismissed simply as an amusement mausoleum, it remains to this day America's populist frontier" (2002:187). What is this "lingering charge" and how is it experienced by city dwellers today?

In this thesis I hope to explore, through some of the everyday practices of visitors and residents who continue to inhabit the "present" of Coney Island, the multiplicity of ways in which Coney is both lived and imagined as an urban place. I draw heavily on the work of the late Michel De Certeau (1984, 1994) and his theories of walking and storytelling as everyday practices which render the city habitable for city dwellers and uncontrollable by urban authorities. I will also use the work of Tim Edensor (2005) on industrial ruins to explore the possibilities of sensual encounters with unregulated urban terrain and to examine how these explorations allow us to both re-imagine the past and multiply the meanings of the present city. Using the lens of ruins and decayed structures, I do not wish to suggest that Coney Island is by any means an abandoned part of the city. Nor do I seek to raise the aesthetics of decaying urban structures above the needs of city dwellers. But it is through a theoretical look at urban ruins as spaces of sensual disorder that I wish to underline a need to study less regulated urban spaces as they are practiced and felt, in order to understand the complexities of the city.

The central concept I use to understand Coney Island as an urban place is De Certeau's "illegibility." Through architecture and planning, the city attempts to present itself as a legible, rational text which is visually consumed as a series of images. This conceptualization of reading the city as a coherent whole has taken various forms over the course of urban development. M. Christine Boyer (1994) describes the

“pictorialization” of urban space over time, claiming that the urban realm has alternately been imagined as a work of art, a panorama and a spectacle. In all of these incarnations, the planning of space seeks to create “totalizing” images of the city: “In all of these views, the disarray of everyday life is marked as the threatening other, the forbidden difference that gnaws away at puristic illusions” (Boyer 1994:58). The aesthetic principles that inform architecture and city planning are never completely sterile, but in their attempts to assert the city as knowable and containable, they limit the ways in which urban space is lived.

In the “illegible” city however, this aesthetic rationality is subverted through the sensory experiences of city dwellers. I wish to highlight the fluidity and tension between the textual, legible city and the sensual, illegible city, avoiding any hard and fast dichotomies between the two. I assert that a constant struggle unfolds in the streets between aesthetically driven notions of what the city should be: looked upon as a visual, rational text, and notions of what the city could be: embodied through less scripted, more irrational and emotional performances. Historically, I link these two conceptualizations of the city to their expressions in turn of the century Coney Island: the White City and the Midway. In the Coney Island of today, these performances are often unable to be read or interpreted by urban authorities, allowing Coney to emerge as a space of illegible practices.

This subversion of aesthetics is closely linked to De Certeau’s notion of walking as a spatial practice of storytelling which evades urban authority’s attempts to render the city legible. Although the use of the word story would imply a linear narrative, these

narratives are constructed through the ephemeral traces of nomadic bodies. As we wander the streets, we are actively telling and living our own spatial stories which escape totalizing images of the city as a rational whole: “The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility” (De Certeau 1984:93). The city that is alive with stories resists legibility and aesthetically driven order as meanings become mobile; a “second, poetic geography is laid on top of the geography of permitted meanings” (De Certeau 1984:105).

It is with this poetic, mobile and illegible geography in mind that I wish to examine Coney Island. I will consider Coney first as a distinctively urban space of tourism which contests traditional practices of visual consumption, then as a public space of playful, unregulated bodies, and finally, as a space of remembering where absence in the built landscape lets visitors insert their own imaginings.

Methods

Miles Richardson writes that “the world is not an external thing, existing apart from our actions and awaiting our entrance; but it is dependent upon our being in (it). Through our actions, our interactions, we bring about the world in which we then are; we create so that we may be, in our own creations” (1982:421). This statement can be aptly applied to ethnographic research, as researchers strive to understand rather than answer, grasping at a way of being in the world as one partial truth among many. In the recognition of our own place in the constant bringing about of the world, we must

become a part of the places we study in order to understand how they become meaningful to others.

Coney Island, like all urban places, is not a question with an answer, although developers and city officials have often believed otherwise. I found myself not asking what should be done with Coney as it stands on the brink of potential redevelopment; nor did I ask the often heard “what happened to Coney Island?” Instead, I took a stab at exploring the question posed by the woman I spoke with: Why does Coney still inspire us? Through ethnographic practice, I searched to find some of the stories of the everyday place of Coney in the lives of the people who live it. As Denis Cosgrove and Mona Domosh write, storytelling becomes an integral part of the practice of qualitative research wherein “these stories are to be read not as approximations of reality, but as tales of how we have understood the world” (1993:37). This, then, is a tale of how I have understood Coney Island.

Loretta Lees (2001, 2003) calls for a return of ethnographic research to urban geography, asserting a need, in conjunction with the search for symbolic “meanings and representations,” for a study of the city that is performative, examining the “embodied” practices which transcend the city as symbolic text. The study of embodied experiences of place revalorizes the everyday in urban spaces, making us “aware of the unseen” as we examine the habitual as a fluid process of emergent meanings by which we contest or confirm scripted meanings (Harrison 2000). This consideration of everyday practices contrasts with earlier conceptualizations of the “everyday” in geographical thought. For example, the work of Fred Kniffen (1936), although invaluable to cultural geographers’

understanding of vernacular architecture and material landscapes, focuses solely on visual representations, ignoring more dynamic struggles for power that occur between people and the places they inhabit.

The everyday performances that I wish to consider are often emotional rather than rational and it is this “emotional work” which must be returned to the city:

Boldly stated, I believe that greater emphasis in thinking about what is real about cities needs to be placed on the forms of emotional work that comprise urban experiences. What is real, then, about cities is as much emotional as physical, as much visible as invisible, as much slow moving as ever speeding up, as much coincidence as connection (Pile 2005:3).

In this study, I attempt to return some of this emotional work to Coney Island, placing an emphasis on how our bodies and minds discover, practice and imagine urban space. Emotional work is integral to understanding cities as sites of complex meanings and must be applied not only to theoretical research but also to the practical work of planning. As Steve Pile writes, “To deal with the real city- the city as it really is- does not mean taking into account its physical and social structures, but also its mental life” (2005:180).

My ethnographic research took place over four months, during the winter and summer of 2005. This research included participant observation, semi-structured interviews and open-ended interviews. The bulk of it occurred in the summertime, considering that ethnography would be nearly impossible in the winter. Coney Island is still a summertime destination and this is the season when the reality of year-round residents collides with the ephemeral experiences of tourists. I spent my days along the boardwalk and beach, in and out of local bars and stores, and for long periods of time, on

the train. Due to the structure of the New York City subway system, what would have been a 15-minute car trip from my apartment in Queens became a nearly three-hour roundtrip journey by subway.



New York Metro Area (www.aacessmaps.com)

The prospect of renting an apartment in Coney Island proved difficult due to my financial constraints as well as the constraints of the neighborhood itself. Coney Island is a fairly tight knit community composed mostly of elderly residents who occupy the older housing stock and younger, immigrant families living in public housing units. The opportunities for temporary sublets in the area are almost non-existent. However, my distance from Coney Island proved invaluable to my understanding of how Coney is experienced by the majority of its visitors. These “tourists,” who are in most cases native New Yorkers, ride the train as part of a kind of pilgrimage to the sea, down from the

Bronx, Manhattan and Queens. As I read, slept and dreamed my way to the end of the subway line, I took my place among almost 100 years of New York City pilgrims, reliving a well-worn voyage. It was here that I realized that the journey to Coney Island is never accidental.

My nine semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews were mostly done with current residents or with people who had long-term connections to the neighborhood. A few of these were with well-recognized artists who have directly experienced the grassroots revitalization of Coney Island, beginning in the early 1980s (see Denson 2002). My questions focused on exploring how changes in the neighborhood have been experienced emotionally but more importantly, what Coney Island means to these individuals today in the face of potential redevelopment. Interestingly, the interviewees needed little or no guidance, often talking emphatically and passionately for hours. As author and Coney native Charles Denson once said, “Coney Island brings out the full range of human emotion.”

Four of my most informative interviewees who will appear frequently in the body of this paper are Captain Jim, Piper, Karen and Max. Captain Jim, who uses the moniker “Captain” for his fascination with the sea, came to Coney after over a decade spent as a jungle guide in Belize. I met Jim on a damp, overcast January day for one of his famous walking tours of golden era Coney. I was the only visitor on that particular day and although my hands and feet were numb within ten minutes of our walk, Jim strolled happily down the boardwalk in shorts, a Hawaiian shirt and sailor’s hat, lost in a nostalgic vision of flea circuses and steam ships. Jim is a talker, a walker and a collector

of all things Coney Island, regularly approached on the boardwalk by Coney fanatics looking for artifacts of a lost city by the sea. He occupies a place between the past and present of Coney Island, both an instant “old-timer” for his fascination with an imagined Coney just out of reach and a force of revitalization, living above a boardwalk restaurant and actively participating in local events.

Piper and Karen are both visual artists who live a kind of love affair with Coney that is experienced through all the senses. These women touch, taste and smell Coney Island. Piper’s love affair is still new, as she moved to the area recently from California. Karen’s is an older dance, a well-worn marriage, having grown up in Coney and returned years later to her self proclaimed “roots.” Karen feels the ghosts, describing Coney as “a magic place...a big old diamond set in platinum.” “I never put grave markers on any of my family,” she says, “but I figured, instead I’ll put the money into buying paint and canvas and beautifying something they loved.” Karen often describes herself as someone who straddles a line between blue-collar roots and the world of high art and academia. In Coney Island, she says, she can be herself, creating public art that is enjoyed by any city dweller who wanders the amusement area.

When invited by a friend to come to the annual Mermaid Parade, Piper took the plunge and lost herself in Coney. “I am a mermaid,” says Piper as matter of fact. “My mother was a mermaid, my sisters were all mermaids.” When I visited her at home, I began to believe her. I was welcomed warmly into an artist’s studio-by-the-sea, littered with glittery objects, seashells and various incarnations of mermaids. If there is a spirit in Coney, Piper is beginning to skirt the edges of it. In Coney Island she revels in a last

bastion of kooky carnival wonders, pedaling her pink bike across the boards while tracking the essence of her idol “Bambi the Mermaid,” a burlesque performer. She is currently planning what she calls her “performative Coney Island tour,” traveling to local nursing homes to sing and play piano, dressed in mermaid garb of course.

The youngest of my interviewees, Max, in his late twenties, is a realist. I met Max over beers at a summertime art opening and he spoke frankly about the future of the neighborhood. A slightly nervous, serious man, Max is an observer and cataloger of the city’s forgotten places, photographing old signs, graffiti and abandoned lots. Max both loves Coney for its place in his childhood, spent in nearby Brighton Beach, and maintains an intuitive sense of the city as a growing, changing organism. He provided me with a sharp insight into the balance that is necessary with regard to future development of the area.

The intimacy of these interviews helped me to understand the depth of emotional attachment to place felt by Coney’s longer-term residents. However, much of my research came about through countless unstructured encounters along Coney’s boardwalk and adjacent amusement areas, bars and stores. These coincidental encounters were equally emotional, evidence of the power of any truly urban place to bring people together by chance. Everyone had something to say about Coney and needed little prodding to do so. I participated in various local rituals, ranging from the January 1st Polar bear plunge into the Atlantic Ocean to the Summer Solstice Mermaid parade. I also attended numerous seminars, freak shows, art openings, concerts, ball games, beauty pageants, burlesque shows and any other bizarre Coney event that I stumbled across.

These events and experiences took place almost entirely during the day. Although I will discuss the rhetoric of marginalization imposed on Coney Island during the 1970s and 80s, I must admit that any stigma of drug use, crime and prostitution attached to a neighborhood is never entirely imagined. Despite the fact that the neighborhood's incidence of violent crime has greatly reduced over the past 10 years, nighttime Coney can take on an almost sinister air as amusements shut down and a few lone stragglers trudge along the shoreline. There is a feeling of desolation in this nighttime Coney, of last resorts and stalled dreams. Perhaps this is part of a romantic notion concerning the darker side of the carnival experience. As one interviewee put it, Coney Island has always been about "going to the extremes in certain areas of life and death." Nevertheless, in reality the neighborhood is also one of the poorest in Brooklyn and with little else to do after nightfall, many restless souls go looking for trouble. After-hours Coney became a masculine space where my role as a researcher was subsumed by concerns for my safety as a woman. Although this thesis is very much a celebration of Coney Island's uniqueness as an urban place, an exploration of Coney after dark would have perhaps told a more troubling story.

My archival research was largely spent at the New York Public Research Library and comes principally from the New York Times. Unfortunately, during the time of my research the Brooklyn Daily Eagle archives were inaccessible. Through some of the writings of the past 100 years, I gained a sense that although the built fabric of Coney has changed drastically, its emotional role for New Yorkers has changed very little. However, my focus was not archival, as many past studies have already examined the

place of Coney Island in the turn of the century industrial city and its meaning for American popular culture (Kasson 1978, Peiss 1986, Nasaw 1993, Immerso 2002). Instead, I set out to understand what Coney means today and how the “present” of Coney Island emerges through the everyday practices of visitors and residents.

Historical Background

It is no use to criticize humanity. Like all creations, it survives its critics. The only interesting thing is try to understand it, or, at least, appreciate. Perhaps Coney Island is the most human thing that God ever made, or permitted the devil to make. -Richard Le Gallienne (1905, in Snow 1984)

For the purposes of this paper, I will look briefly at the history of Coney Island as a site of struggle to control the “proper” meaning of the city, a theme that has shaped the use of space and the image of the neighborhood over the past 100 years. In many ways, the history of Coney Island has been a dichotomous struggle between the city as a space of containment and rational social control, and a space of untamed play and urban difference. Attempts at urban “containment” have gone through various permutations over the course of this history and all have proved somewhat disastrous. But it seems that the city always rises from the ashes; since the 1920s Coney Island has remained a primarily working class, inescapably urban amusement zone. The debate over the proper meaning of urban space is no less relevant today as Coney Island faces possible redevelopment and talk of homogenized recreation facilities seem reminiscent of anti-urban propositions of the past.

Although significant numbers of vacationers began coming to Coney as early as the 1830s and 40s, the current situation of the neighborhood is most closely tied to its turn of the century history as an urban amusement area. This particular history places

Coney Island as an ancestor of the World's Fairs of the late 1800s. Springing up across America, these fairs themselves became miniature expressions of the tension between the utopian city and a more heterogeneous urban reality. Within the fairgrounds, the "White City" was as a space of education and refinement, presenting visitors with a utopian tableau of a highly sanitized city extricated from the messiness of poverty, crime and other urban "problems" (Nasaw 1993). The assertion of the White City as an urban ideal resonated throughout turn of the century city planning, later giving birth to the "City Beautiful" movements (Kasson 1978). In this manner "the metropolis was reconfigured not only as a tourist sight for visitors, but as a utopian vision of what the city could become" (Nasaw 1993:78). Bryant Simon describes the White City at Chicago's World Columbian Exposition of 1893:

An artificial city within a real city...the White City spoke in highbrow tones through a series of classical architectural quotations. Its perfectly symmetrical buildings and deliberately right-angled streets announced that this was an urban utopia of order and rationality, a place of refinement at the very pinnacle of the Darwinian hierarchy (2004:46).

The White City, however, was always stalked by its darker, urban "other": the Midway. "As a result fairs often found themselves in symbiosis with disorderly carnivals of more 'popular' entertainments" (Sorkin 1992:210). The Midway was a disordered maze of twisting streets which included exotic presentations of other cultures, girlie shows, freak shows, bars and just plain rowdy fun. The fairs allowed for these areas when officially endorsed, justified by the pedagogical rationality of the realm of the White City. However, when not officially sponsored Midway-like spaces often sprang up of their own accord. David Nasaw describes the Philadelphia "Centennial Exposition" of

1876, where an unofficial Midway space known as “Shantyville” or “Dinkey-town” was constructed:

Unplanned and unwanted, directly across the street, where, within view of the stately exhibition halls and manicured lawns, a small army of hustlers, showmen, saloon keepers, and performers provided fairgoers with a taste of peanuts, beer, and sideshow ‘attractions’ (1993:66).

Turn of the century Coney Island was in many ways the offspring of the Midway and its philosophy of entertainment without edification. However, the formation of Coney’s three major parks, Steeplechase, Luna Park and Dreamland, was not completely devoid of White City ideology. These parks were gated, admission was charged, and an effort on the part of the parks’ owners was made to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate guests. In their subtle attempts at social manipulation for profit, Coney’s official amusement parks became the unconscious predecessors to Disneyland where “amusement park managers assumed the task of promoting a sense of spontaneous gaiety through calculated means” (Kasson 1978:82). As John Kasson notes, both “Coney Island entrepreneurs and progressive reformers...wished to manipulate the responses of the masses- one in service of social progress, the other in service of profit” (1978:105).

Steeplechase, the longest lasting park, remained a predominately working class space while Luna Park and Dreamland catered to a more middle-class crowd. Dreamland, the most outwardly “corporate” of the three, suffered immensely for its attempts at highbrow entertainment (Denson 2002). It seemed that Coney Island was best suited to a more disorderly, working class release. Nonetheless, all three amusement parks were important for their social and technological experimentation, creating an urban mass culture where “one surrendered one’s individual standing in the outside world

and merged into a temporary play community which coexisted with one's visit and dissolved immediately thereafter" (Nasaw 1993:94).

Outside the gates of these private parks, more disorganized amusement areas sprang up, often along the area that was collectively known as "The Bowery." These spaces represented the spirit of the Midway, catering to "low" tastes. It was in this tangle of unofficial amusements that visitors experimented with the darker side of urban life "in which customary roles are reversed, hierarchies overturned, and penalties suspended" (Kasson 1978:50). Interestingly enough, it is exactly this kind of Midway spirit that survives in Coney Island today and is often believed to be the "true" spirit of the area (Baldock 2003, Souss 2004).

The 1920s brought about various changes in the accessibility of Coney Island to city residents. The beach, once a private space accessed through bathhouses, became public, a boardwalk was constructed and an extension of the subway system linked Coney to the rest of New York City. These changes transformed Coney Island into a working-man's paradise, coining the name the "Empire of the Nickel." However, as Robert Moses stepped into position as New York City Parks Commissioner in the 1930s this identity was called into question. Moses notoriously detested what he termed the urban chaos of the area. In 1937, through an alteration of a charter which transferred ownership from the Brooklyn borough president to the City Parks Department, Moses gained control of both the beach and boardwalk. Over the next 20 years, he campaigned for the transformation of Coney Island from a honky-tonk amusement area into a middle class recreation space on par with Long Island's Jones Beach. This campaign occurred

contemporaneously with the City Parks movement which sought to distinguish between undisciplined and disciplined kinds of play spaces. In the eyes of city officials these spaces were vital staging grounds for the assimilation of a growing immigrant population. Coney Island, as a space of undisciplined play, was slated to become a prisoner of the ideals of the rational White City.

But this certainly didn't happen without a fight and it was through the opposition of a handful of city officials that Coney preserved part of its role as an urban amusement area. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia took an adversarial stance towards a sanitized vision for Coney. "Just because I love Beethoven and Bach doesn't mean that everyone else has to like Beethoven and Bach," he wrote in response to Moses' confirmed disgust with low class amusement (Mayor 1934:14). The debate over the fate of Coney Island became one of high culture against working class amusement. A particularly salient example of this debate occurred in the 1940s with the discussion of the possible relocation of the New York Aquarium to Coney Island. In a New York Times editorial, a certain Arthur S. Hirsh responds to a proponent of the Aquarium who writes that "many of the moving fish would help us to believe life could be graceful, even if it does not show itself to be so in the subways":

If he means grace in the sense of a dancer I would agree, but there are other kinds of grace. Watching the faces of the honest, hard-working citizens returning from their work or going to Coney Island, looking at the expressions of their children with their unworried faces, full of enthusiasm at their expectation of a day at Coney Island. That is the kind of grace that has helped to make this country what it is today (Hirsch 1943:18).

Thirty years later, the Aquarium faced off once again against "honky-tonk" culture, attempting to have the aging Cyclone roller coaster torn down for an extension of their

facilities. They did not succeed and the coaster was designated a landmark shortly thereafter.

The 1960s and 70s brought about major changes in the fabric of the neighborhood. Although air conditioners, the automobile and postwar wealth are often blamed for the decline of Coney Island, the neighborhood's downward spiral became part of a much more complicated story of racism, fear and the desire to eliminate the chance encounters of the urban (Simon 2004). Simon (2004) describes the postwar period in America as distinctively anti-urban and this aptly characterizes the real and narrated marginalization of Coney Island. This anti-urbanism arose in part as a defensive reaction to the chaotic social, racial and economic problems that city officials often found themselves ill equipped to handle. The city had become "too urban" and the chaos of the Midway had finally spilled completely over into the White City, undermining any superficial attempts to contain urban difference. Coney Island became part of a discourse which naturalized the city as a chaotic jungle in order to justify racist tendencies and out-of-sight out-of-mind political practices.

Much of this decline is attributed to Robert Moses. Beginning in the 1950s, Moses allowed Coney Island's amusement zone to decline to the brink of extinction in order to necessitate practices of urban renewal, razing the land for public housing projects. After the closing of Steeplechase Park in 1964, the area became a veritable dumping ground for the city of New York in a manner quite similar to many of the formally industrial waterfront spaces of Manhattan (Denson 2002, Lopate 2004). What

was undesirable was pushed to the edge, including housing projects, psychiatric hospitals, geriatric homes, prisons and quite literally, trash.

It is important to note that during this period of marginalization Coney Island was still being used as an amusement area by thousands of New Yorkers who could not afford to go elsewhere. The rhetoric of ghost town Coney largely ignored the importance of the neighborhood for these city residents in a similar manner to that of Times Square, which was also used by lesser advantaged city residents as an affordable recreation space. In the 1960s and 70s, both Coney Island and Times Square became too risky, too urban and too black for middle class white city dwellers (Eeckhout 2001). Brad Eeckhout (2001) notes that this narrated marginalization of Times Square as a place of urban decay and disorder was later used to justify the reappropriation and subsequent renewal of the area as a middle class space. The Times Square of today remains a middle class tourist space which has been largely sapped of its working class contingent.

Some of the most interesting signs of rebirth in Coney Island began in the 1980s through the grass roots efforts of visual and performance artists. Charles Denson (2002) calls this period of time “the crisis of imagination,” where the neighborhood needed to be re-envisioned through a return to its carnival roots. Principally through the efforts of Coney Island U.S.A. and its director Dick Zigun, some of this culture returned to the area in the form of public art projects, a museum, various festivals and sideshow performances. But the struggle for meaning and belonging in the city was far from over in Coney Island. In 1995, Coney Island U.S.A. was asked to leave its boardwalk location

for the installation of a McDonald's, an occurrence which Zigun refers to as the fight between "McCulture and Americano Bizarro" (Denson 2002:235).



Keyspan Park, home of the Brooklyn Cyclones

As New York City attempted to recover its image in the 1990s, the conservative administration of Rudolph Giuliani set their sights on Coney Island as a space of potential tourist revenue. In 2001, a controversial baseball stadium was erected along the boardwalk for the Brooklyn Cyclones, a farm team of the New York Mets. In the eyes of its proponents, the stadium was predicted to revitalize the neighborhood, providing jobs for local residents and a much-needed boost in tourism. After the revitalization of South Street Seaport and Times Square in Manhattan, Coney Island has become the next site of interest for a variety of development, as much of the land remains vacant. Whether Coney Island will maintain its working class character and urban diversity remains to be seen.

Chapter 2

A Small Town with Stuffed Animals: Sensual Tourism in the City

Ah, but remember that the city is a funny place/Something like a circus or a sewer/And just remember different people have peculiar tastes/And the glory of love, the glory of love/The glory of love might see you through... –Lou Reed, “Coney Island Baby” (1976).

From Midtown Manhattan to Coney Island, Brooklyn, it’s a long ride. It takes on the air of a pilgrimage as the train wanders down through the working class neighborhoods of Mexican and Chinese Sunset Park, Hasidic Borough Park, and Italian and Russian Bensonhurst. Finally, the train passes out over the Coney Island Creek, the color of mud mixed with old car parts, and the Wonder Wheel rises like a carnival apparition out of a sea of stark housing projects. The hum of riders’ voices becomes a magical chant: Coney Island, Coney Island, they whisper. “The whole world’s going to Coney Island!” exclaims one little boy and island becomes *eessland* as he switches easily from English to Spanish. They pour out of the train and run for the sea, tugging carts full of food, blasting hip-hop on boom boxes, their lives on their backs. These are New Yorkers and this is their Island.

Coney Island is at once a small town, a neighborhood of Brooklyn, a tourist destination principally for native New Yorkers and secondarily, for those outside of New York. Its dense urban fabric contests traditional ideas about tourist spaces of the post-industrial city as landscapes of visual order where sterility and simulation have removed visitors from sensual contact with urban difference (Sorkin 1992, Eeckhout 2001). Many contemporary tourist spaces function by elevating aesthetics over the needs of city dwellers, thus separating city “work” from city “play” (Boyer 1992, 1994, Madanipour

1999, Edensor 2001). It is through this separation that suburban ideals invade the city and tourist space emerges as a “happy regulated vision of pleasure” which functions by “stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work” (Sorkin 1992: xv). Through efforts to visually contain the city, urban-ness disappears and with it, any chance at negotiating the differences it contains. As Eeckhout writes of the redevelopment of Times Square and other corporatized public spaces of the city, these new spaces “do not sufficiently unsettle or disturb, and thus fail to teach us how to negotiate complexity in an intrinsically complex and ever more interconnected world” (2001:424). Such cityscapes encourage “visual consumption, but not social exploration” (Eeckhout 2001:408).

The city which is seen as sensually chaotic must be tamed through architectural aesthetics, ensuring a safe, un-challenging experience for the tourist to gaze upon. As Simon notes in his study of Atlantic City, New Jersey, casino building became a practice by which “real and performed” containment attempted to render the city “irrelevant” (2004:209). “Although this pictorialization [of urban space] may amuse, lull, or even entertain us,” writes Boyer, “it does not alienate, nor hold us accountable, nor sustain our resistance” (1994:3). The preoccupation with visual order, maintained through urban aesthetics, encourages a simplistic kind of voyeurism where tourists are “sustained by the pleasures of picture writing and the experience of ‘just looking’” (Boyer 1992:199):

The image of the city is narrowed to the aesthetic experience of pure visual contemplation and to the physical configuration of place. Such a pleasurable and rationally composed cityscape, with its carefully drawn nodes, pathways, and edges, can be readily consumed by the tourist or spectator. (Boyer 1994:442)

The emphasis on visual consumption of the cityscape removes tourist bodies from

sensual engagement with the urban fabric or as Mitchell writes, “More than the movement of capital in these new spaces, it’s the movement without effort or resistance” (2003:189). Tourist bodies move between symbolic, well-planned nodes, often by automobile, ignoring the gaps in the city created by uneven geographic development (Boyer 1994). Architecture fights a war against urban difference through its affirmation of visual order, “bolster[ing] the built environment against the ever possible specter of decline and obsolescence” (Mitchell 2003:177). In extreme cases, such as the removal of the homeless from public parks, this overvaluation of the visual threatens to raise “aesthetics over the needs of some people simply to survive” (Mitchell 2003:9). Even in spaces which seek to mimic the spontaneity of the city, planned theatricality is cleansed of economic and social inequalities. For example, the recent explosion of festival marketplaces along urban waterfronts function by aestheticizing spontaneity, allowing visitors to experience the city as joyful spectacle while remaining insulated from the uncomfortable aspects of urban-ness (Goss 1997).

Not only is the visual prized through the planning and development of urban tourist spaces, but also in the way in which geographers have studied them. Mike Crang (1999, see also Crawshaw and Urry 1997) encourages geographers to incorporate embodied practices into the study of tourist spaces, understanding tourism as a process rather than a fixed act: “Analyzing inscription and marking without looking for practices can only produce a mortuary geography drained of the actual life that inhabits these places” (Crang 1999:248). Through the study of these more fluid practices, we may

move toward an understanding of tourism, as it is both constrained by and contests visual efforts to shape these experiences.

It is through a study of both the tourist practices which transcend mere visual consumption and the urban spaces which encourage such transcendence that a more complex understanding of urban tourism may be gained. “By tracing those settings and practices which enable greater scope for improvisation,” writes Edensor, “we are able to see how the material and sensual qualities of particular spaces interrupt the equanimity of disciplined and regulated embodied dispositions” (2001:79). These spaces of improvisation are often found in parts of the city which mix urban residents with what are often suburban tourists, creating what Edensor terms “heterogeneous” tourist space. In such spaces urban-ness is uncontainable, seeping out through the cracks of the visually ordered cityscape, allowing for different performances of tourism:

In certain kinds of heterogeneous space, like bazaars, fluid events, activities and movements arise, random juxtapositions of objects and people occur, and there is a sensory and physical bombardment which precludes anything other than a contingent performance. The sensory and social overload means that reflexive performances may be denied by the immanence of experience, and in any case rehearsed tourist roles have little coherence in these settings (Edensor 2001:77).

Coney Island functions as a heterogeneous tourist space that offers possibilities for less officially scripted experiences of tourism. Because Coney has not been extricated from its urban-ness, visitors must transcend visual practices of ‘just looking’ suggested by Boyer. The needs of city dwellers mix with those of tourists in search of a “real” city experience. As the play of release and the work of a real city neighborhood are inextricably bound, visitors cannot ignore the realities and inconsistencies of a city which is relevant once again, or at least impossible to ignore.

Polar Bears and the Kids from Brooklyn: Coney Island Natives and New York Native-tourists

They wanna build a mall. They want to build something there. It's not going to work because it's a small town with, you know, stuffed animals. Like there's this one guy, um, the one dart game, the balloon dart game. I pass by there in the winter and the owners of the place, they have that thing open in the winter and they're just sitting there having breakfast and talking about the news. That's like, their home porch and it's crazy. If you come there in the winter, you'll find that some of the stands are just open and it's the old guys that own it, that's where they show up. It's the last of I think, the small businesses with people who are truly connected to it. - Max

David Lindsay writes that in Coney Island “the seaside strollers need no guidebooks to find their way. They are still resolutely inside the story of their lives” (Stein 1998:8). It is these “stories” which give form to Coney Island’s year-round community: a neighborhood on the southern edge of Brooklyn, and sometimes, seemingly, the edge of the world. From September to May, sword swallows, fire breathers, can collectors, fishermen, artists, senior citizens, schools teachers, Russians, Puerto Ricans, Italians, Jews and countless others people this regular city neighborhood.



A city block near the subway station

Coney Island's amusement district is largely comprised of small business owners with longtime connections to the neighborhood, a notable few of whom still live above their businesses. This district, which is often referred to as "Coney Island" in the eyes of many visitors, is only four blocks long and is bounded on all sides by regular city streets making it a recreation anomaly in an otherwise regular Brooklyn neighborhood, on par with a large church carnival. City streets run directly up to the boardwalk, remaining open and running 24 hours a day, allowing the work of an urban neighborhood to collide with summer practices of tourism. To the west of the amusement district is the private community of Seagate, largely Hasidic and highly insular; to the north, a patchwork of housing projects, small businesses, and row homes and geriatric facilities; and to the east, Little Odessa, the largest community of Russians in the United States. In its isolation from the heavy tourist traffic of Midtown Manhattan, Coney Island emerges first and foremost as a functioning year-round Brooklyn neighborhood with its own rituals, regulars and rules.



Coney Island and surrounding neighborhoods (www.aaccessmaps.com)

Lore, legends and rituals add an almost provincial quality to this local scale. On wintertime Saturdays, the Polar Bear Club, largely comprised of slightly over-weight, elderly men, plunge into the icy waters of the Atlantic and in the heat of June the same waters part for Yoruba bathing rituals of good luck and happiness. The rituals of this fairly isolated community bind year-round residents into what some describe as a kind of secret society. Piper refers to “the kooky guy who I don’t even know who wears this sailor hat. He like sees me in my car and he’s like ‘hi’ and I’m like ‘hi,’ like we’re part of something.” The “something” which she describes is more than a city neighborhood. It is, in her words, a “magic vibe that infiltrates the spirit of Brooklyn.”

Coney Island is like an old courtesan, her hair frazzled, teeth cracked and too much rouge on her cheeks; she is gutsy and earthy and past caring about the formal niceties of her trade. And she is comfortable with her circle of old-timers (Franks 1976:48).

Coney Island’s “circle of old timers” gathers along the boardwalk, principally in the two boardwalk bars which cater firstly to this local crowd. The iconography in the interior of Cha Cha’s Bar is pure Brooklyn, Italo-American, and secondarily makes reference to Coney Island’s amusement district. “Whaddya want? We’re from Brooklyn!” barks a plaque on the wall while the advertisements on the side of the building for cheap beer and Western Union credit remind visitors of the everyday realities of one of the poorest neighborhoods in the borough. Next door, at Ruby’s Bar, the walls are covered with pictures of Coney Island in its heyday but these are largely interspersed with snapshots of the friends and family of the proprietors.

Outside tourists are forced to adjust their tastes with regard to these local businesses, as Coney Island’s business owners seem blissfully oblivious of turning a

tourist profit. In the same manner in which the elderly men show up to the balloon stand in wintertime, these businesses become less tourist driven consumption spaces than everyday spaces which are extensions of city life. For example, a local pizza shop that is reputedly the best in all of New York City, is almost impossible to find. To experience the taste I was forced to negotiate the urban fabric of the neighborhood, traveling down Neptune Avenue where Coney's amusement area is left far beyond in a rough transition to residential housing and auto repair shops. Only blocks from the beach, the smell of salt water is traded for motor oil and the carnival's blur of brash color is muted to gunmetal gray. The sky hangs low and mechanics linger in darkened doorways, awaiting the arrival of the cars that seldom come. When I finally arrived, I was greeted by a little Italian woman in a housecoat sitting on a plastic green lawn chair, staring through thick glasses. "They're closed," she growled. When were they open? Nobody seemed to know, you just had to get lucky. When I finally gained entry, it was somewhat like arriving unexpectedly at an acquaintance's family dinner. A sign on the wall read, "We don't know anything about the pizza business; all we care about is making great pizza."

The intensely local scale of Coney Island raises questions of belonging in a year-round community and only part-time tourist space. But despite the threat of large-scale development, the present needs of the local urban scale seem to triumph. When I asked about the possibility of bigger tourist plans for Coney Island, Vincent, a long time boardwalk business owner, threw up his hands:

Whaddya want? It's Coney Island! A mall? Where are these people going to come from? Despite the businesses [on the boardwalk] doing a quarter of a million dollar business, do you see them fixing the signs up? No! Why? Cause this is Coney Island. It's the neighborhood.

There is a sense that the neighborhood always “belongs” first to these year-round residents. Roxanne, a bartender who has lived in Coney Island for over 10 years, still expresses that “this is theirs (long time neighborhood residents). I can’t say it’s mine.” She implies that these long-time residents are those not there by choice, having been relocated to Coney Island in public housing, assisted living, geriatric, or mental care facilities.

Two hotels exist in Coney Island. One, located near the subway station, is fittingly named “The Terminal Hotel” and is terminally shut. The other, tucked into a strange little alley in the center of the amusement district, is reputedly a Russian whorehouse. Beyond the scope of the year-round community, Coney functions first as a tourist destination for native New Yorkers, which I will refer to as native tourists. These native tourists presumably don’t need hotels, arriving in the subway station daily as urban transients and carrying everything they’ll need for the day on their backs. As Captain Jim expressed to me, why build hotels when “they’ll have sex on the beach.” Another local merchant echoed the absurdity of Coney Island becoming solely a tourist space for visitors from outside of New York City: “These are New Yorkers, they don’t need malls, they don’t need hotels. They’ve got all they need in their neighborhoods.”

The majority of visitors to Coney come from Brooklyn, becoming what Piper calls “tourists in their own borough.” This observation underlines the intensely local scale of tourism to Coney Island:

When I’m in schools all around Brooklyn and we talk about a favorite memory of a kid, like, what identifies Brooklyn as a place for you, 9 out of 10 kids will be like ‘Nathan’s cheese fries’ or ‘the Cyclone’ or ‘going to Coney Island with my

parents. So these are like tourists in their own borough. Never mind you see someone with a Norwegian tee shirt on or something.

As a visitor from Queens, I was regarded as an almost foreign traveler. “You came all the way from Queens!?” exclaimed one man. Although Coney Island is inextricably part of the urban fabric of New York City, linked since the 1920s by subway, the journey to Coney Island remains a very different one from other tourist destinations in Manhattan such as Times Square and South Street Seaport. Says Max:

Times Square is a nexus. Even if you don’t wanna really be there, you’re there. There’s reasons for you to pass through. And the whole thing is tourist oriented. Coney Island, you have to go there. There’s no reason for you to be there other than for you to be there.

“Being there” must be consciously chosen and is not particularly easy by car, considering the highly limited amount of parking spots. Coney Island is not an easy sightseeing stop on a whirlwind tour of Manhattan and thus remains a destination principally for New York residents by way of city transit.

For many working class New Yorkers without cars, Coney Island is the only choice for a summertime getaway. As Vincent told me, “It’s a no choice situation. People are forced here.” There is a fear that even this “forced” choice will be taken away from these working class New Yorkers by more affluent tourists from outside the city. Elisabeth, a local resident who lives in subsidized housing, spoke with me about her fears concerning the future development of the area:

Casinos and hotels, for, you know, tourist people that come out here and I would really feel like I’m out of place. It’s [Coney Island] a place where you don’t have to think twice about spending a little bit of money with your children. Make it affordable so when we wanna leave the house we be able to, you know, take the kids and spend a little bit of money on them, not just sight-seeing you know.

While everybody else is spending money cause they can afford it we just gotta walk past it?

The possibilities of new development raise uncomfortable questions about belonging and inequality in the new city of spectacle and tourist capital. Who will Coney be remade for and at what cost? At the city level however, the area remains a viable summertime release for those who cannot afford to go elsewhere. It is exactly Coney's present function as a city neighborhood and site of native New York tourism, which creates the urban experience that outsiders seek.

All Your Tickets for a Toaster: Seeking Urban Difference as Sensual Experience

What do non-native tourists look for when they come to Coney Island? "They're looking for New York City's amusement park," says Dick Zigun:

And they're looking for the loud, urban, sophisticated amusement park. Nobody wants Coney Island to compete with Disney or Great Adventure or Six Flags, you know, a spotlessly clean, suburban, homogenized, middle class amusement park. They're looking for things that reek of New York City's sophistication...the rides playing hip-hop instead of Britney Spears.

New York City's "sophistication" becomes urban difference, which serves as a foil for more homogenous, suburban spaces. If Boyer (1994) writes of the city made spectacle, where urban areas are remade for tourist consumption, Coney becomes the spectacle of the city, where the desire for an uncompromised, un-mediated urban experience propels non-native tourists to explore a part of the city that is used by native dwellers. "I think the allure is, to be honest, it's like a freakshow of an area in itself," says Max, who often takes non-native friends to visit the area. Similarly, another local woman describes the visit of her French relatives who recently came to New York City for the first time. The only two spots they were insistent on visiting were Harlem and

Coney Island, claiming that they wanted to see the “real” America. This “real” America is presumably real in its uncompromised urban-ness. Urban reality is transformed into a spectacle which non-native tourists seek. It is not a spectacle that is created for them but which rises up around them, almost oblivious to their presence.

This experience of urban tourism is similar to what Michael Sorkin (1992) calls the search for an “honest image,” where tourists to hyper-real spaces such as Disneyland look in vain for some trace of authenticity, coming up empty handed as they are faced with simulation. In Coney Island, an “honest image” is already present and thus the question of replicating or simulating what is already a “real” city neighborhood seems counter-intuitive. Dick Zigun comments that the idea of tearing down the original Nathan’s Hot Dogs to build a reproduction, a plan that has been discussed by developers, would be “just insane.” It is the inherent urban-ness in Coney’s existing fabric, both in the built landscape and through practice, which provides visitors with a unique tourist experience that refuses to be denied in plans of possible redevelopment. As Piper questions:

But I mean, who, really, for real, when it gets down to the human labor and vision of it, who’s going to run the freakshow? The freaks that are there! What, they’re going to have some higher priced freaks come in that are holding cash that we don’t even know about? They’re going to run the freakshow and it’s going to go up to 20 dollars like the Museum of Modern Art? It’s already kinda pricey I think. Five bucks? That’s high to see the freaks in action!

Through the experience of urban difference, tourist performances move beyond the visual consumption of tableaux images of what the city should be, into sensually chosen experiences of what the city is or could be, arising through the unregulated freedom of personal practice. A young man I met along the boardwalk comments that

tourists are looking for “authenticity” in the people “hollering for the games,” a practice which gains its authenticity through the immediacy of street performance. Similarly, another young woman exclaims, “That’s so authentic!” in reference to men who smoke cigarettes while they run the carnival games. Cigarette smoking is an activity that has been banned from all indoor, public New York City spaces and becomes a sign of the recent urban past of a less regulated city. Coney Island is perceived as a space where this sensual urban-ness should be allowed. On one occasion, I observed a man entering a boardwalk bar who refused to put out a cigar, questioning the waitress incredulously, “What are you, the smoking police?” His refusal is part of the perception of Coney as an urban space which functions differently from more regimented parts of the city. The refusal of native tourists to conform to such standards creates the urban sensuality which outside visitors seek.

This longing for experiential urban-ness is expressed, albeit sarcastically, by Hank, a local community board member, in reference to the redevelopment of Times Square: “42nd Street to me has become so antiseptic and boring. This place needs some character. Why don’t you hire some women to just stand in the doorways, to give it some class? It’s nothing anymore!” Times Square becomes “nothing anymore” through the removal of prostitutes, a marginal group which contributes to the concept of urban character. The “character” of the city becomes its characters, its regular urban dwellers who go about their everyday practices of city living. As a local politician once said at a Coney Island event, “This is Brooklyn. Nowhere else has more character or more characters.” These urban characters are presumably what visitors come looking for in

Coney Island. Says Piper, “I think there’s characters that make this place, and they’re very welcoming.”

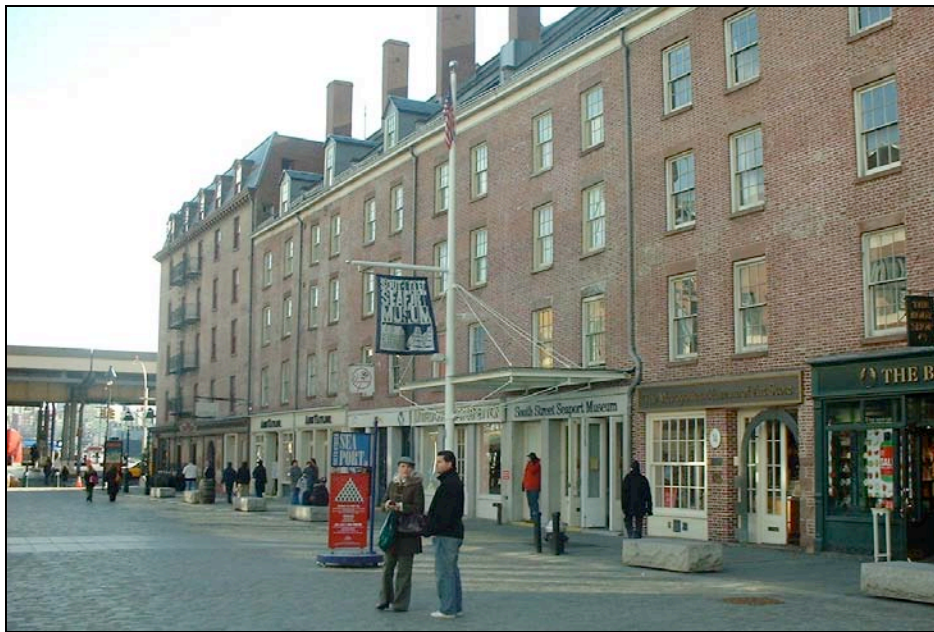
The unique tourist experience of Coney Island often arises through ephemeral, corporeal moments. When asked what Coney Island means to him, one visitor told me gleefully that it meant “eating food that’s terrible for you!” The release that tourists experience in Coney Island is not only urban in character but is also accompanied by a temporary abandonment of “high” cultural standards found in tourist spaces concerned with edification. Captain Jim describes Nick’s Greasy Spoon, a since closed restaurant on Surf Avenue where visitors crave sensual moments over the visual consumption of images:

It was a dirty mess but you couldn’t get in the place, it was crowded, it was packed! Now it’s a Russian high-priced pictures [shop] that are repro [ductions]. People walk right by. They want an ice cream or a custard or some watermelon or a soda or look at the freak show, not pictures.

Although tourists from outside of New York are initially drawn to visit based on name recognition or the “myth” of Coney Island, they often come all the way down to Coney for two simple reasons: to ride the Cyclone rollercoaster and to eat a Nathan’s hot dog. Despite the reality that Nathan’s Hot Dogs are marketed all over the country at highway rest stops, tourists long for an experience which is perceived as authentic because it takes place in its original location, and because it sensually engages the body. One visitor notes that even though the hot dogs don’t taste that good anymore, you simply “have to” sample the original. The Cyclone rollercoaster functions in a similar manner. “You have to go on the cyclone because it’s authentic, wooden,” says a visitor. Authenticity is perceived not through age but through the corporeal experience of riding a

wooden rollercoaster that'll "break your back" in the words of another rider, harkening back to a time when safety regulations were not as steep.

Outside of these two main attractions, Coney's carnival games function as consumption spaces where the experiences sold are irrational, sensual and almost childlike in their bizarre innocence. These experiences are chosen spontaneously, allowing direct human connection with local business owners as visitors wander unregulated through the amusement area. As discussed in the Introduction, the historical precedent for this disorderly carnival world came about through the Midway, which formed a dialectical relationship with the more regulated utopia of the White City.



"The White City": South Street Seaport

With the larger private parks of Coney long gone, the neighborhood's present day amusement area gives itself over entirely to carnival. This carnival space now stands in

opposition to the “White City” spaces of suburban tourism in Manhattan, namely South Street Seaport and Times Square.

Carnival games are often played at irrational financial costs where tourists give themselves over to chance in order to have what they perceive of as a unique experience. In Coney Island, visitors directly engage their bodies in often ridiculous activities such as dancing, singing, smashing plastic groundhogs, dunking men with buckets of water and lobbing paintballs at human targets, consuming these experiences either solely for the sheer joy of their absurdity or in conjunction with the possibility of a bizarre prize. In the words of some visitors, “They want that big big doll that’s going to cost 45 dollars before you go home with it [in order to win it in the carnival game]” or the toaster oven “which is really like 14 dollars and the skeeball ticket price [is] like 10,000 which means you’re going to spend like a couple hundred dollars for a toaster.” On the long subway ride home to the Bronx, to Queens and beyond, adults and children alike fall asleep clutching giant neon giraffes, airplanes whose wings don’t work, empty cartons of popcorn whose meanings lie less in the products themselves than in the experience of winning or consuming them in a special world that seems to operate according to its own rules. The height of the carnival experience is found at “Shoot the Freak,” a boardwalk game that allows the visitor to shoot at a live, moving human target with a paintball gun. What do they win? Nothing. Consumption merges with and disappears into a surreal experience, which in the words of the game’s proprietor can happen “only in Coney Island.”

This tourist experience moves beyond a recapturing of childlike innocence, becoming a kind of release which opposes itself to more conspicuous forms of consumption. As Max tells me:

If I go into a bar, let's say, and I have a bad drink and I paid seven dollars for it, I'm going to be pissed off about that the whole night. I go to Coney Island and I spend five dollars trying to get a ball in a basket and I win a two dollar stuffed animal, I'm happy. It's not being a kid again. It's nostalgia for what this place can give you.

What this place can "give you" is an experience which is largely unregulated by urban authority and unmediated by simulations of an imagined "authentic." "They're [game operators] selling these dreams in a way," says Piper:

They're selling these unique experiences, like playing skeeball and getting all those little tickets for like, nothing, the compass that's going to come apart two seconds later. Sometimes it gets down to issues of longing. And I think that people long for an experience. Life is so difficult.

This once again raises the question of authenticity and the tourist search for an "honest" image in a city filled with simulated spectacles. As Sorkin describes the tourist experience of Disneyland: "The simulation's referent is ever elsewhere; the 'authenticity' of the substitution always depends on the knowledge, however faded, of some absent genuine" (1992:216). In Coney, tourists long for what Disney denies them: an urban experience based on the present genuine where the broken compass is real in its imperfections, a talisman of a city filled with inconsistencies and the immediacy of carnival chance.

The Whale Tank and the Roller Coaster: Struggles to Suppress the Urban

At one point they tried to lobby to tear down the Cyclone for a whale tank. You know, it's a little bit insane when you think about [it], cause, you know God bless the whale, but you're going to tear down this piece of history? - Max

Coney's urban sensuality has been in constant tension with suburban efforts to cleanse the space of its difference, placing the natural realm of its oceanfront location in opposition to the urban reality of its role as working class respite. This battle reached its height in the 1970s over the possible removal of the Cyclone roller coaster for an extension of the New York Aquarium, located next door. According to William Conway, the then director of the New York Zoological Society:

The Cyclone looms over the Aquarium and the noise and the shrieking and the visual pollution are pretty grim. You are going around looking at some seal or octopus and this thing is coming around a curb screaming and yelling at you. It is not conducive to the kind of message we are trying to get across (Aquarium 1975).

The "message" was that Coney Island should be a space to experience nature as containment, not celebration, and certainly not as urban working class release. Forging connections with nature in urban tourist spaces often becomes a conscious denial of urban realities. "In affirming the connection with nature," writes Neil Smith, "the new city denies the social history, the struggles that made it" (1992:73). The struggles that made and continue to make Coney Island are those of working class New Yorkers, seeking their own space for release and relaxation. The struggle between working class reality and nature as containment continues today as Coney's perceived sensual disorder is used to justify potential "middle-class," anti-urban development. Frankie, a long time resident and ride operator, notes that now even the seals of the aquarium have become too noisy for the residents of nearby apartment buildings.

This struggle is also part of a narrative often heard over the past 30 years, which pitted local urban interests against those of higher income non-native tourists. This

narrative constructed Coney as a place whose problems would be solved by extending the summer season, creating “world class, year round amusements.” From the 1970s onward, Coney was often referred to as “the South-Bronx-by-the Sea,” a nickname that both marginalized and racialized the neighborhood (making reference to the largely Hispanic neighborhoods of the South Bronx) while subtly removing the city from blame for its decline. The greater reality that this story ignored was that Coney Island was continuing to be used as a vacation spot for millions of New Yorkers who simply could not afford to go elsewhere.



A typical summer day at the beach

This narrative continues today as discussions for future developments center around the idea of attracting outside tourists to Coney Island, ignoring the experiences of the thousands of visitors who have continued to come on summer weekends for the past 30 years. Apparently, these aren't the “right” people: namely tourists from outside of

New York City with money to spend in the new city of capital and consumption where visions of Times Square dance in the heads of developers and city officials.

The experiences of native tourists stand in stark contrast to the marginalization of the neighborhood by the media. If Coney is the “South-Bronx-by-the-sea” in the newspapers, the kids from the South Bronx see it quite differently. For many visitors from the South Bronx a trip to Coney Island is a special vacation which is often more expensive than life in their home borough. As one young woman on the beach exclaims to her friend who complains about food prices, “We in Coney Island, we’re not in the Bronx where shit’s cheap!” For this young woman and many native visitors like her, Coney Island is a destination that stands apart from her everyday life in the Bronx.

Efforts to suppress the working-class character of the neighborhood extend into a more subtle discussion of aesthetics and cleanliness, which once again threatens to prize visual order over sensual urban difference. This debate has become important in newly revitalized tourist spaces across the city. Boyer describes the revitalization of the South Street Seaport area in Manhattan into a tourist space and festival marketplace as a process which removed “working” sensuality in order to create a static tableau: “Only the removal of the fish from the fish market finally made the ‘historic’ tableau commercially viable” (1992:203).

This removal of sensual difference in favor of visual order is emphasized in Karen’s discussion of her outdoor artwork. She mentions the comments of a critic who was unable to experience her art because of what he perceived as too much sensual distraction:

He was saying he couldn't look at art with all the competition in Coney Island with the noise and the food and the seagulls, and he wasn't like getting in the zone if that makes any sense. I mean if you buy one of my paintings and take it home, you're not going to sit there with your hands folded. You're going to have parties, you're going to have fights, your cats are going to maybe climb on it.

This collision between nature and culture, urban experience and high art, is precisely what public urban spaces facilitate. In Coney Island, the urban refuses to be contained at the expense of a visually tamed, natural retreat for the upper class. Here, I heard native tourists often refer to seagulls as pigeons and witnessed the ocean become more like a public swimming pool than a source of existential contemplation on hot summer afternoons. By contrast, "the de-odorization of urban space, the restrictions of sounds and the encoding of a visual order render contemporary cities devoid of rich sensual as well as social experience" (Edensor 2005:57).

"Cleaning up" the city often extends beyond physical cleanliness, becoming a process which removes urban difference through the valorization of aesthetics (Mitchell 2003). The fine line between dirt and sterility, danger and city experience, calls into question the balance between aesthetics and more complicated urban realities. Giovanna, a longtime resident, expresses the desire for a level of cleanliness that does not come at the expense of the spirit of the neighborhood:

I'd love to walk down a street, a clean street, as pristine as it could be. Though that really doesn't go with Coney Island (laughing). But I would like to not smell urine. I'm not talking about pristine. I'm talking about just a level of [pause] that you don't not want to deal with it.

Many Coney residents and visitors I spoke with echo this desire to have a physically cleaner space but one which does not risk becoming homogenized or sterilized in the process. Interestingly enough, it is precisely Coney's urban-ness that may render it

sensually impossible to homogenize through large-scale amusement areas. Captain Jim comments that “Disney was going to put a water park in here,” but that it “would probably be closed by the board of health two weeks after it was opened with the chicken bones and the discharge of all the stuff on the sand.” This impossibility of “cleaning” Coney, both literally and metaphorically, underlines its undeniable presence as a public urban space which is used in a multiplicity of ways.

The Slow Ride down the Boardwalk: Spontaneous Tourist Practices and the “Present” of Coney Island

Coney Island serves as a foil for Disneyfied amusement areas such as Times Square and Las Vegas through its unregulated urban-ness which encourages more chosen experiences of tourism. The experience of tourism in more regulated, often corporatized amusement areas functions as an expression of the “legible” city where aesthetics of belonging attempt to limit the performances possible. As Hank explains:

Now the difference between the amusement district and Coney Island in general, from the Disneylands or the Great Adventures and all of that is that...Coney Island is a place that people come just to let their hair down. You know when you go to some of these other amusement areas or even to an Atlantic City or a Las Vegas, you're going there and there's a set routine that you expect to go into. Coney Island, people just come down to Coney Island and, you know, then it's play as you will. It's sad. And we have to avoid that kind of pitfall [of other amusement areas]. It's a very unrelaxed situation in Midtown Manhattan [Times Square]. It's a tourist thing; it's a very unrelaxed thing. Where are they going? How are they doing it?

In Coney Island, tourist practices move beyond “where are they going, how are they doing it” because the “play as you will” urban sensuality lets visitors “do it” any way they want, creating their own Coney Island experience through unplanned wanderings and discoveries in an urban neighborhood. “Disneyland,” writes Sorkin, “is

in perpetual shadow, propelling visitors to an unvisitable past or future, or to some (inconvenient) geography” (1992:216). By contrast, Coney Island’s authenticity is linked to an experience of the present city, emergent in the spatial practices of those who use it. Coney Island is brought into being through the men who show up early winter mornings to drink coffee and swap stories at the balloon dart booth, the little Italian lady who sits outside the pizza store. These practices attract outside, often suburban tourists in their seemingly joyful disorder, while forming an order all their own for the city dwellers who live them. As the everyday life of the city mixes with the desires of tourists, both groups’ practices elude the efforts of urban authorities to impose visual order on the neighborhood.

The struggle between Coney Island and Disneyland is ultimately a struggle between suburban vision and urban reality where Disneyland becomes a kind of denial over uneven geographical development and difference in the city. It is exactly this “difference” which allows Coney to be used by both native tourists and outside tourists seeking to explore a “real” city. Coney’s urban-ness allows for different experiences of tourism to exist co-spatially; I watched high school kids down from inner city public schools in the South Bronx and East Harlem snap pictures of each other on their cell phones, while further down the boardwalk a professional Italian photographer used Coney’s “mysterious” atmosphere for a fashion shoot. “I don’t think that’s any problem at all,” says Captain Jim. “I mean, you see the mob here, and these are from the Bronx, these are from Queens, hundreds of thousands of them. And then the European tourists are here. It all melts into one thing.”

Visitors wander, largely unsurveilled, through a thick urban fabric which encourages a multitude of playful practices and performances of tourism. These small, less mediated city experiences make Coney Island, becoming “authentic” for each person who chooses them. As Piper describes her favorite Coney Island experience:

When I saw that bike, it was a winter day and it was just nice enough that the little shacks down at Coney opened up with their weird stuff and that guy sold me that bike for 30 bucks. And when I first moved here, I took that bike and went down and got a caramel apple and I went slow as molasses, eating that caramel apple, down the boardwalk and that was my Coney Island experience. That was authentic. I was in heaven. So that might be the authentic experience. The cotton candy melting in your mouth, or screaming when the guy swallows the flame. Or actually going on the Cyclone which is insane, I’ll never do it again.



Wandering the amusement area

These personal performances of tourism are encouraged by the urban disorder of Coney Island which transcends more regulated visual norms imposed by suburbanized city spaces. Through unmediated urban experience, we allow our bodies to wander

through the uneven interstices of a city that is improvised. The illegibility of these experiences emerges through the playful practices of bodies.

Chapter 3

“Let Your Freak out on the Boardwalk”: Everyday Play and the Making of Public Space

Among the most popular attractions, according to the younger Tilyou [owner of Steeplechase Park], were booths with imitation china dishes, objects to throw at them, and a sign: ‘If you can’t break up your own home, break up ours!’ Thus encouraged, Coney Island visitors exuberantly shed the roles of the larger world. (Kasson 1978:59)

The freak wears a silver spray painted suit, a Darth Vader style helmet, and lives below the boardwalk along with a decaying stuffed bear and assorted lawn chairs. He spends his days dodging paintballs lobbed joyfully at him by any brave passerby who has a few bucks and a mean streak. “Shoot the Freak” is the most popular and the most infamous game on the boardwalk. It is often experienced solely through the hollers of the modern day barkers who scream at boardwalk strollers in thick Brooklyn accents: “Let your freak out on the boardwalk, anybody can do this! It’s therapy with a paintball gun! Get out all your tension, all your aggression, let your beer belly out! He can absorb all that toxic stuff you have inside of you! Only here in Coney Island. Try to do this somewhere else and you won’t get away with it!” One muggy summer afternoon in front of the target practice, a disheveled, drunken man rifles through a trash can. He strips off his shirt and starts screaming wildly at a tourist couple who’ve stopped to watch “Shoot the Freak.” Both look slightly disturbed, torn between the somewhat “official” spectacle of the carnival game and the more troubling reality of life in the city. “Fun filled family entertainment,” grumbles the woman, to which the man responds, “I think we know who the real freak is.”

Coney Island's inescapable urban-ness, as discussed in the previous chapter, creates the sensual disorder that allows visitors to play and explore in a "real" city neighborhood. Release is possible through this urban sensuality and playful bodies gain their own particular logic, shaping Coney Island into a unique public space. Rob Shields writes of bodies on the beach as "resistant" as they are given over to this sensuality: "Against the restraining empiricism, cerebral rationality, emphasis on control and economy, carnival produces a momentary social space based on politics of pleasure and physical senses" (1991:95). As the middle class tourists confront the screaming drunken man they may not learn about tolerance or the injustice of poverty. However, through the everyday negotiations of boardwalk spaces, emergent through playful practice, they are at least forced to confront these differences.



Shoot the Freak, wintertime

Public space as studied by geographers has focused on questions of access, social justice and political action, largely neglecting the more playful and everyday ways in which we make, experience and transgress the limits of the city (Zukin 1995, Goheen 1998, Mitchell 2003). These playful practices open the city to multiple meanings through which our bodies become active sites where we may contest and re-make the established meanings of urban spaces. While such practices may not be inherently political, it is through them that we resist ordered meanings of the built environment, transforming the city from what it claims to be into what it could be.

Peter Goheen (1998) contrasts two views of public space with regard to everyday practice. In Richard Sennett's (1994) description of the city explorer as voyeur, everyday practice gives no opportunity for action or change. This is contrasted with the ideas of De Certeau (1984) and the research of Sharon Zukin (1995) where many of the daily practices of city dwellers are given the power to challenge the visual order or "legibility" of the built environment. The illegibility of these everyday practices is what De Certeau terms "the poetic overlay." It is through these practices that "a migrational, or metaphorical [city]...slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city" (1984:93). Tim Cresswell echoes the idea of illegibility in his study of graffiti in New York City as "a mobile and temporary set of meanings" which inserts itself into "the formal spatial structure of the city" (1996:47). It is through both conscious and unconscious everyday practice that the city dweller's idea of the city triumphs over that of urban authority. These acts help to maintain a public quality to urban places where "the street, in some

sense, is ‘appropriated’ by those who live in it, reclaimed from the enormous condescension of those who own it” (Cresswell 1996:47).

While much of the literature on public space in the post-industrial city has bemoaned the loss of public life and community, Don Mitchell notes that “definitions of public space and ‘the public’ are not universal and enduring; they are produced rather through constant struggle in the past and the present” (1995:121). This nostalgia for a lost public life ignores the reality that public spaces have always involved certain types of exclusions: who constituted the “public” and who had the right to citizenry (Mitchell 1995:116). The struggle to define who has the right to participate in the making and occupying of public space constantly emerges as a dynamic process.

Public space is negotiated through the regulations of builders, planners and developers and through the practices of city dwellers, which both contest and confirm these official meanings. Zukin (1995) notes that the transference of many publicly owned city spaces into the hands of private owners becomes not nearly as important as the everyday practices through which people appropriate these spaces. Cultures are constantly made at the micro-level of the street; private spaces become “public” through the everyday practices of city-dwellers in an “open-ended” process. Similarly, Trushna Parekh (2002) explores how city inhabitants are able to redefine officially private urban spaces as public through everyday use. Lees applies non-representational theory to her study of public space, advocating for a “critical geography of architecture” in order “to explore the ways that the built environment is shaped and given meaning through the

active and embodied practices by which it is produced, appropriated and inhabited” (2001:56).

Increasingly, highly surveilled spaces have sought to control the performance of bodies in the city (see Ritzer and Liska 1997). Edensor argues that the subtle manipulation of bodies in spaces such as museums has bled into other parts of the city, forming a system of “modern regulatory schemes to organize the behavior of bodies in public space” which function through the “instantiation of performative norms” (2005:136). These performative norms, which are imposed by more regulated city spaces narrow the amount of performances possible and thus the possibilities of who and what constitutes the public. Not only do these spaces shape certain bodily performances, they also maintain notions of order and disorder that seek to rationalize city space by “imposing limits on social interactions” (Mitchell 1995:120). However, in the less regulated spaces of the city, which Edensor (2005) terms spaces of the “carnavalesque,” the performances possible multiply and the meaning of public space is open to contestation.

Playful performances in Coney Island create a new ordering of space through which the visual and symbolic order of the city is contested. Public space emerges, as Zukin (1995) has noted, at the micro-level of the street, where the meanings of the city as “public” become mobile, constantly defined and redefined through playful practice. This play allows visitors to construct multiple identities for urban space as well as for their own bodies in the city. As Harvey Stein notes, Coney Island is “where you bring yourself fully into play rather than being passively manipulated. It’s where it’s all up to

you, where you can see the world as it really is and so know yourself as you really are- or ought to be” (1998:5).

Mama and the Conga Band: Transgressions as Celebration

The Coney Island beach, boardwalk and surrounding neighborhood remains open 24 hours a day, seven days a week (technically the beach and boardwalk are closed from late evening until early morning, but this is largely disregarded and un-enforced). Coney Island’s amusement area is one of the few in the country that is not centrally owned, is un-gated and requires no general admission, allowing visitors to wander freely among the rides and concessions. These freedoms are unique with regard to many of New York City’s other public spaces, most notably city parks, which impose curfews and erect fences and gates. These regulatory practices encourage certain kinds of performances and certain ideas of belonging in what purports to be “public” space (see Zukin 1995 on Bryant Park). In a post September 11th New York City, these spaces are also subject to high levels of surveillance. Although NYPD officers regularly patrol the Coney Island boardwalk, I found their presence to be far less restrictive than in other public spaces, in part because of the mobile practices of an overwhelming number of visitors. The boardwalk is not bounded by fences or gates but rises up as a unique kind of horizontal city street as visitors wander on and off onto the beach and adjacent amusement areas.

On a practical level, Coney Island becomes “public” through its role as an urban neighborhood, where access is granted to anybody who can pay the subway fare. This unrestricted access allows the boardwalk to remain a place where different kinds of visitors mingle and play together. Karen describes a recent art opening at Ruby’s bar

where “hipsters and art world luminaries and local artists and local crazy people and just local people...everybody just kind of mixed and had a blast.” Similarly, a local shopkeeper tells a potential employee, “There’s all kinds of people. You need to know how to deal.” This “dealing” with difference is negotiated playfully through recreational practices.

The experience of wandering the boardwalk and amusement area is not only free to all but it is also what Max refers to as “human scale,” remaining unique in its encouragement of lingering and direct interactions with local business people. “The thing that’s nice about it is you can casually hang out in Coney Island,” he tells me. “This is very rare [in today’s city].” The ability to linger has increasingly become absent from so-called “public” spaces across America. As Piper notes:

When Americans hit the road in the summer, they have a timing that they don’t realize exists. And that’s if you pull over at a roadside place, you’re meant to use the bathroom, buy something, maybe eat it there, and a short time later, leave. If a person stays for any longer than that and something starts to unfold and they’re doing something else besides those activities, there will be police there soon enough.

The freedom to wander and linger along the beach and boardwalk also allows street vendors to participate in a kind of commerce which is particular to large cities, seeming to spring up almost as weeds through the cracks of more regulated spaces. As a space of commerce Coney Island seems more closely aligned with a Middle Eastern bazaar than a Western shopping mall: illegal vendors hawk their wares on benches, out of carts and backpacks, selling everything from Mexican pastries to live snakes and peacock feathers; prices are negotiated and personal contacts are made. In a commodity world which is increasingly homogenized and corporatized, Coney’s boardwalk remains a

stronghold of the traveling salesman, whether in the form of a kooky impresario sporting a live iguana on top of his head or a working Puerto Rican mother from East Harlem, selling kitchen magnets she's made by hand.



Flea market food vendor

All of these activities, by official Coney rules, are illegal. However, these traveling, playful expressions of commerce are largely ignored by city officials, forming a series of personal practices that are less overt resistance to established law than evidence of the inventiveness of city dwellers fulfilling small scale, everyday needs. Max notes that Coney Island is “one of the few places where you don’t have to own a street cart to have a business.” While flea-markets and bric-a-brac furniture stores are currently facing being run out of the neighborhood for lack of compliance with zoning regulations, the more playful practices of the traveling salesmen along the boardwalk and beach elude authorities, impossible to contain or control through the multiplicity and

mobility of their activities. Zukin describes the street bazaar around Fulton Street in a similar light, as an “ambiguous” consumption space which “owe[s] more to the unmediated theatricality of medieval and early modern markets than to the calculated stage settings of merchant princes of mass consumption” (1995:190). These ambiguous consumption spaces, she notes, become places in which we can practice a “child’s geography” through a sensual engagement with the products consumed.

Through the creative practices of urban people, Coney Island’s boardwalk becomes a sort of sticks and stones experience, an everyday urban toy. This adaptivity is also evident through the personal appropriations of public space, which occur along its length. These acts are less concerned with claiming space than enjoying it as locals and visitors alike often “set up camp” on the boardwalk, forming little enclaves which transform the boardwalk from official city owned “public” recreation space to intimate, front porch space. This is the reclamation of the street which Cresswell (1996) suggests, as city people take back what is rightfully theirs for personal uses. These enclaves become both part of the spectacle of the boardwalk for those wandering by and a means to watch the spectacle of the walkers.

Cha Cha’s, Ruby’s and the Grillhouse, the three main boardwalk eateries and bars, all have regular communities that form little social clubs using the tables and chairs out front. Says Captain Jim, “You see them searching for that [a street café experience] in front of Ruby’s, they have little chairs and they’re sitting there and they’re like so relaxed and then they move it out a little further.” These groups are comprised mostly of neighborhood residents but also of drifters and homeless, as well as tourists from New

York and beyond. The boardwalk functions as something more than a city street, where lingering does not become loitering and city officials rarely harass the homeless for being in public view.

I found that many people chose the boardwalk over the beach area in order to watch the human dramas unfold, turning their backs to the ocean and even going as far as to set up baby pools along the boards. This geography of human scale encampments follows an intuition regarding which spaces are appropriate for human dramas and which are unwelcoming as visitors remain absent from spaces which do not offer the possibility of intimate interactions. On the landside of the boardwalk, city parks are neglected in favor of boardwalk benches. A legacy of Robert Moses' park planning era in which nature was meant to be pacified, and playful bodies contained and instructed, the community facilities erected along the length of the beach and boardwalk remain underused during the summer season. In contrast to the aesthetic principles suggested by city parks and recreation centers, the beach and boardwalk encourage unruly and free play as bodies explore open space. Kasson describes the tension between "the contrasting kinds of play, [which] to the minds of a number of reformers [in New York City], meant the difference between civilization and barbarism" (1978:101). Visitors to Coney, then as now, chose "barbarism".

The Abe Stark Sports Center, a community center built in the 1970s, resembles a dark brown prison covered in barbed wires which even most residents don't know is fully functioning. The architecture of Abe Stark appears not to concern itself with human needs and thus, humans don't care for it. This structure forms part of what Max describes

as the “no man’s land” of the boardwalk. The no-man’s land exists beyond the Parachute Jump, a defunct ride from the original Steeplechase Park: “It’s really a no man’s land in a way because it isn’t even unsafe past there, it’s just barren. It’s like a desert.” The real no-man’s land is found further down as visitors are confronted with the giant fence of the Seagate private community, an anomaly in the otherwise public city neighborhood.

Residents outside the wall react with anger, claiming that the private beach which charges admission is “the same” as the public beach of Coney Island. Giovanna questions the motivations of the Seagate community: “Either you’re New York or you’re not, you’re Brooklyn or you’re not.” Presumably, being “New York” or “Brooklyn” is about being open to the public.



Abe Stark Sports Center

However, across the way, next to an abandoned lifeguard station, I often observed a little group meet to listen to the radio and talk, and further down, in the shadow of the abandoned Child’s restaurant building, the same practice occurred. Although both

buildings are shut, they are intuitively felt to be appropriate for gathering. The pavilion, which stands somewhat removed from the main tourist drag, is also used as an intimate space for principally local dramas: convalescents are read to from thick Russian novels, and homeless men gather to trade baseball cards and cans. Both the Child's building and the pavilion are places of communication, covered in colorful graffiti messages and alive with the language of exchange and play. If, as Cresswell (1996) has noted, graffiti offers city dwellers a language in which to talk back to urban authority, these are places of oral, ephemeral voices, which arise spontaneously and are encouraged to linger and resonate. They are chosen as both physical and imaginary spaces in which city dwellers may insert their bodies and assert their identities. In contrast, the Abe Stark building stands silent and monolithic, refusing dialogue in its blank, uniform shade of cardboard brown that shows no marks of human presence. It is both physically and psychologically impossible to surround or penetrate, fronted by thick sharp wire and backed by a barren parking lot, which has long been used for nighttime prostitution. The officially designated community center is thus relinquished for the unofficial encampments that provide their users with a sense of possibility in their encouragement of intimate practices.

Similarly, at the east end of the boardwalk the buildings of the Aquarium prove difficult to relate to. One of these has a complicated boardwalk entrance while the other has no entrance at all. Max describes this area in a similar manner to the deserted no-man's land of the west end as "that big vast emptiness. [The aquarium] has no presence on the boardwalk." I watched visitors circle the structures, searching for a way in and often giving up, frustrated by the giant freeway sound wall which fronts the Aquarium.

“Why are they avoiding presenting the boardwalk as a street?” asks Max. The aquarium is instinctively experienced as a space that is not part of the free roaming of the boardwalk, where space can be appropriated for playful and intimate use. The aquarium’s meaning is non-negotiable: It is a private space, experienced through a rather high admission fee only, set back from the boardwalk.



Wall outside the New York Aquarium

As boardwalk space is appropriated for small-scale human activity, rules and boundaries are transgressed in playful ways, which are not resistant so much as they are celebratory. These playful transgressions help visitors form their own personal experiences, disregarding rules that don’t fit their ideas of release and pleasure. These transgressions are not new; Oliver Pilat writes of Coney in 1941 where “almost instinctively the multitude violated rules not designed for its own benefit” (317). However, the line between celebratory and resistant behavior has often been blurred by city officials. Regulations for the beach and boardwalk area during the Robert Moses era

forbid such absurdly playful practices as “throwing of sand, masks, goggles or fins, flying of kites, acrobatics and digging of holes” (Willensky 1986:182).

Today current regulations include “feeding birds or squirrels, amplified sound, vending, performing except by permit and rummaging through trash receptacles.” These practices all involve sensual and corporeal disorder and visions of Coney as a recreation space where bodies must be “contained.” These rules are regularly transgressed as part of the celebration of Coney Island as a place of release. Warning flags are put up on the beach and they are routinely crossed; signs reading “keep off the jetty” are posted and visitors run freely past them, forming part of an energy that is more a joyful exploration of open space than a conscience resistance to the laws created. Babies are washed in the water fountains, feet are washed in the sink, clothes are changed on benches, the homeless find decent meals in the trash bin, and boom boxes blast Spanish hip-hop and biblical messages. Everyone has a chance to make a sound and the police do little to control it, overwhelmed by the multiplicity of these sensual practices.

This playful release begins on the train ride down where travelers blast music at volumes that would be unlawful elsewhere in the city’s subway system but which are largely ignored on the ride to Coney. As the approach gets closer and travelers catch their first glimpse of the Wonder Wheel they begin to ready themselves for entry into a different realm. On a few occasions I witnessed grown-ups swinging from subway poles, laughing hysterically as they approached Coney Island. This is reminiscent of Hank’s comment that Coney Island stands opposed to other amusement areas in that “people

come just to let their hair down,” where the atmosphere is “play as you will, very free.” It is what Karen refers to as Coney’s spirit of “lawlessness.”

The selling and consuming of alcohol in open air spaces is also illegal but forms another everyday practice that is a joyful contestation of a rule which visitors to Coney deem nonsensical. Captain Jim describes this celebratory transgression:

If we go out on the pier they have some conga drums and loud music to hide Mama, a Spanish lady, [who] very nicely brings out a cardboard box, inside the box is a bubbling oil fryer that she makes these codfish pancakes [on]. And it’s delicious, in the hot sun, a nice potato chip thing with the fish in it and a legal Pepsi or an illegal Corona. And they have that and they have the conga band to hide it so the cops don’t see it, which is unexpected. You think on that melee out there you can’t see nothing, but we have it!

I watched another man justify his non-compliance with alcohol regulations to a police officer through this celebration, saying, “Keep it real. Don’t say if you weren’t just relaxing with your sons on the beach you wouldn’t be drinking. You’d be fishing down at the pier with a Corona!” As Captain Jim expresses, Coney Island’s power as a public space rests in the freedom of the practices which it may not explicitly permit but whose transgressions are justified through play: “To come to a place where you can have a beer, a cold beer and sit there in a bathing suit with bare feet. You can’t do that in New York City.” Technically “you can’t do that” in Coney Island either but it seems to inherently fit with the freedom of the area as a largely unsurveilled, open public space.

The police form what is more of a presence than an actual force, often ignoring these small transgressions, or at best, sending out a warning to those involved. Illegal water ice vending pushcarts are regularly stopped but the words “next time I’ll take your cart” seem more a necessary part of the job than an actual threat. At times, the police too

cannot avoid playing: navigating bodies of the beach in their dune buggies, driving in zigzags backward across the sand laughing, or flirting with bikini-clad young women at Coney Island events. One humid afternoon in Cha Cha's, I watched Roxanne flash her breasts to a passer-by who responded by mooning her while two police officers wandered by, laughing and pointing at the spectacle. Police officers appear to forget where they are from time to time, shedding official roles in favor of more playful ones. It is also interesting to note the small symbolic presence of city officials in Coney Island. Despite the City of New York Parks Department's ownership of both the beach and boardwalk, very little visual presence of this ownership is evident. The little green leaf, a symbol of the Park's Department, stands dully next to the brashly colored confusion of street performers, visitors and the hand-painted signs of local businesses.

“The 260 pound club”: People Watching and the Spectacle of the Body

“When Coney Island no longer had the capacity to astound and amaze the masses,” writes Michael Immerso, “the crowd itself became a heaving canvas, a kind of populist performance piece” (2002:148). Today Coney remains a place of human spectacle “where exhibitionism retains its human scale and original spontaneous flaws” (Lindsay in Stein 1998:8). These spontaneous flaws play freely along the beach and boardwalk whereas they are often discouraged in other public city spaces which regulate themselves according to stricter aesthetic norms.

Unlike the city street, where a certain awareness of proper performances is maintained, bodies run free along the boardwalk and beach, almost unconsciously discovering space. As painter David Levine notes, “When you have a crowd walking up

and down Fifth Avenue, they are doing one thing-walking. Here at Coney Island the variety of activities is enormous, and all you have to do is wait for the gestures to produce themselves” (Shenker 1971:A1). I watch a pregnant Hispanic woman race into the ocean in pants and a tee-shirt; two Hasidic girls in heavy clothing clutch hands and skip through a palm tree sprinkler; Hindi women and Muslim girls lay down in the sand in long magenta skirts and veils. Dick Zigun mentions to me that this very performance of the body is one of the draws for tourists coming to Coney. After all, “it’s half naked New Yorkers walking around.”

Playful release along the beach and boardwalk transforms Coney into a place of acceptance in the eyes of its users. Karen describes Coney as a place where “you can be whoever you are. You can be 400 pounds and walk down the boardwalk in a bikini.” Because access to Coney Island is available to all members of a sprawling, diverse metropolitan region, the diversity of bodies becomes a celebration of the city itself. Captain Jim calls this freedom “the 260 pound club,” describing the short, fat women who sport bikinis. For some, this acceptance is cause for rejoice. Piper revels in the freedom of bodies as it translates into a freedom of different kinds of people, gathering to play. She mentions that one of the things she likes best about moving to Coney Island is “all the Russian men running around in their Speedos with their big bellies.” For others, this performance of the body is all too accepting. A young woman spoke to me with disgust, describing a woman enjoying herself at a Coney Island bar with her “rolls of fat” served by a “crusty old” bartender. However, for many long-term residents this acceptance of bodies translates into a sense of belonging. Giovanna describes it as an

essence that actually gets inside her body: “I’m so filled with it I don’t have to do it. I don’t have to pierce myself or have tattoos to know who I am in the Coney Island atmosphere and I think that’s great. It [Coney Island], in a way, allows me to be me.”

Coney Island’s amusement area is often officially described as being bounded by the Aquarium on one end and the Baseball Stadium at the other. However, the everyday geography of playful bodies along the boardwalk runs from the spot where “Santos and the Romantics” hold their weekend salsa dance party to a bench where an anonymous man manipulates a strange pink Muppet in a briefcase, lip-synching to disco songs from the 70s. Technically, the official amusement area is quite small and the amusements contained within are not on the level of the hyper-real. Outside of this official area, amusement often becomes the spectacle of the “real” and it seems that visitors will watch just about anything.



Spectators surrounding “Santos and the Romantics”

At the “Santos and the Romantics” concert, hundreds of people are drawn to watch what is often only a handful of couples dancing to a live band. There is no stage, no fence, no separations between spectators and the boardwalk dance floor. The stage is carved by spectator’s bodies in a kind of spontaneous street performance where watchers are at turns both participants and spectators. A woman selling beers out of her cooler hawks her wares by yelling, arms in the air, as spectators tip over trashcans to use as seats. Both acts are ignored by authorities.

This spectacle of street culture is free of cost and free to anyone. As Karen notes, “You can get off the subway and you can walk around and look at people, you know. If you have no money to go to the sideshow, you can watch the bally. It’s like a whole street culture. You don’t have to go anywhere cause everything’s happening. You can just wander.” In the eyes of the city, “happenings” are equated with tourist dollars but in the experiences of visitors, “everything” happening becomes everybody, the spectacle and diversity of the urban everyday. We become our own spectacle and prove to be far more interesting than the nature under glass further down at the Aquarium. “The Aquarium’s not that interesting,” says a local vendor, “[you] walk up to the glass and if the fish aren’t there, [then what?]

This experience of everyday urban spectacle does not purport to solve the problems of inequality or teach the tourist couple not to regard a drunken man as “the real freak” but it does provide a place where these different kinds of people are allowed to co-exist. Through this everyday spectacle, the boardwalk becomes a means by which visitors experience, somewhat safely, other cultures, economic backgrounds and

lifestyles. Visitors often stand transfixed watching a group of break-dancers who regularly perform on the boardwalk. In their appeal for donations, they state simply that “what we do keeps us out of two places: the courthouse and your house.” Although many visitors would probably not travel to the respective city neighborhoods of these young men to watch them perform in their element, the shared experience of Coney Island temporarily brings both groups together. Dick Zigun comments that the experience of Coney Island is based on this spectacle of urban bodies:

Disney is sexless and sanitized...New York has always prided itself on being different...if you want an experience that doesn't challenge you in terms of meeting new cultures, go to Disneyland. Go to Epcot and get an artificial introduction to other cultures. Go to Coney Island, walk down the boardwalk to Brighton Beach, and you got a real Russian community (Gonzalez 1997:23).

“Real, inside, alive”: The Freak Show and “Native” Public Art Projects

Although an “official” performance which costs five dollars to experience, the freak show is an extension of the idea of humanity as spectacle in which the audience becomes complicit in the show. Patrons are lured in by the outside barker who repeats the mantra “Real, inside, alive,” emphasizing the performance as something which contrasts simulated spectacles of the hyper-real offered by other tourist spaces. Inside, the audience becomes engaged as the announcer asks over and over, “Do you really want to see it?” as performers threaten to lie on beds of nails, shove screwdrivers up their nostrils and set themselves on fire. As the audience cheers for the performers to go through with the acts, the announcer concedes, “Well okay, for your demented entertainment.” Staged in a small room with wooden bleachers for seats, there is a

sensual immediacy to the performance where the audience can feel the heat of the fire, the rush of air from the snap of a whip.

These are not sexless Disney characters in giant mouse costumes but real, sexy, half-naked New York City performing artists, complete with real tattoos and piercings. Their own bodies become sites of spectacle as they twist, mangle, burn, electrocute and cut themselves. As the show finishes the announcer says gratefully, “Thank *you*, Coney Island.” Here, the audience becomes “Coney Island,” part of the pact of an emergent performance which brings together a diverse group of spectators. As Karen says, “What I love about the show is you go in there and you watch the 10 acts and you’ve got people from neighborhoods, races, cultures, economic backgrounds, classes, who never mingle anywhere else but they’re all united by what’s going on.”

In its sometimes dark appeal to the extremes of human nature, carnival culture also invites visitors to explore the possibility of multiple lives of bodies in the city, evident in the many performances played both on and off official stages. As Giovanna describes this energy:

I say there’s an element of darkness and light in Coney Island. It has a weird vortex of energy going on here and maybe that’s what people feel. Dark in the sense of going to the extremes in certain areas of life and death. I really feel that energy.

The regenerative power of the carnival is described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) as a playful expression of the ideal of togetherness, occupying a space between art and life, spectator and participant. The carnival is an experiential and dynamic form of play which denies any pretense at static, aesthetically driven notions of beauty which emphasize man as a rational, perfected whole. Carnival spaces remind us that power

structures are dynamic and that our bodies are constantly in transition, encouraging us to playfully explore alternative ways of being. The dynamism of carnival proves indestructible as society's constant need to explore the world as unfinished necessitates spaces of the carnivalesque, which Bakhtin refers to as "carnival consciousness." This is similar to Edensor's (2005) notion that ruins, as disordered spaces, allow for performances that challenge normative notions of history. Carnival challenges established identities in the city as spectators explore alternate roles through play:

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because the very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. (Bakhtin 1968:7).

Inside the freakshow, the multiple lives of the performers show us that in the city, identities are porous, chosen, invented and manipulated. Piper alternately refers to sideshow performers as "modern primitives" and "transgressive warriors." This is a public space which, as Levine noted, shows us what we could be by inviting us to be what we are or what we could not be in more regulated, homogenized spaces. The Great Throwdini, a masterful sword and axe thrower, claims also to be a Ph.D. and a minister. "In my spare time I throw knives," he says with a grin. Heather Holliday, the country's youngest female sword-swallower, is also reputedly a practicing Mormon. Similarly, a young man I spoke with was fascinated by the fact that he regularly runs into Insectevora, a former bug eater who currently swallows fire, at local clubs and bars in Manhattan's East Village. The line between performer as city dweller and city dweller as performer is

once again blurry and emergent. Additionally, the Sideshow offers a summer training course for any regular person who wishes to be initiated into carnival culture.



Up close and personal at the Mermaid Parade

At the annual Mermaid Parade, another event sponsored by the same non-profit organization, anybody is allowed to join in, sporting everything from elaborate neon jellyfish suits to ordinary bathing suits with fins attached, in a Dionysian celebration of summertime. The parade is reminiscent of “Shoot the Freak’s” verbal advertisement that “anybody can do this” but “only in Coney Island.” The Mermaid parade is notoriously sexually free, encompassing all kinds of bodies, most of which are nearly completely naked. Participants take on different identities and pseudonyms in celebration of a public sexiness which is shameless and accepting. As one spectator says encouragingly to a wishful participant, “Forget registration! Go with the spirit of it!” The freedom of emergent performances of bodies makes its way onto the beach for the finale in which a

giant watermelon is thrown into the ocean for the “opening” of the beach for summer, a pagan offering to the sea god Neptune. After the watermelon splashes into the water, a whole variety of fruit is tossed gleefully into the waves by spectators and mermaids alike.

These kinds of spectacles are part of what Coney Island U.S.A., the sponsor of the Mermaid Parade and Sideshow by the Seashore, terms “native” American art. Karen describes this native art as something which is distinctively public and chosen: “What Coney Island represents is that you’re voting with your pocketbook. We can choose what popular culture is. We don’t have a king and queen above us telling us that Mozart is the one to listen to.” Just as we chose our Coney Island experiences through playful wanderings, Coney’s “official” performances become a part of our chosen culture where our participation is requested and encouraged.

Outdoor public art becomes another more or less officially condoned part of these playful wanderings, both in the form of local mural projects and more consolidated initiatives such as the Dreamland artist’s project. These pieces function as signs for Coney Island businesses, where the everyday is made beautiful as part of a celebratory experience of public space. “Why shouldn’t what we touch everyday be beautiful?” asks Karen. “I think it’s so cool for regular people who just like wanna go swimming at the beach to have art there. Why shouldn’t they? Even if people don’t go and look at art, I think we’re giving them the message that art, you know, can be for everybody.”

Piper notes that in the inner city classrooms where she teaches, nearly every kid recognizes Karen’s art from visits to Coney:

If you’re in a ghetto classroom and you hold up one of her postcards, every kid in the room has seen it. So even if they haven’t been to the Met, they’ve seen this

beautifully composed piece that functions as a sign, a marketing tool and a piece of fine art.

The experience of art in urban public space, accessible to be enjoyed by any wanderer, transcends the binary between high and low culture, indoor, regulated space and outdoor, celebratory public space. As visitors' bodies are allowed to play and discover along the boardwalk and beach, they experience art which transcends its visual role through an integration with the everydayness of the city lives which take place alongside it.



Public art as signage in the amusement area

A director from the Dreamland Artist's project describes the way in which artists have to adjust to the environment of Coney in a similar light, commenting that working in Coney is "not a controlled environment. That's the nature of Coney. You go with the flow. You would never do that in a museum or a gallery." Through a less controlled,

more playful experience of creating art for a public space, she claims that artists explore “new ways to engage the urban fabric.”

Play, commerce, performance and art all become migratory practices through which Coney Island becomes a unique public space where the boundaries between performer and spectator are blurred through playful bodies. Visitors bring their bodies into play alongside one another in a public space that does not purport to change the world, to protest the government, to end economic strife or solve poverty. It is not a utopian realm in which we are able to forget our differences completely and live in harmony or as a local politician once said, “A place where people have always gotten along.” Nevertheless, in the year 2005, it remains an urban public space where we are given the chance.

Chapter 4

Going through an Old House: Accessing Personal Myths through Emotional Geographies

Natural language carries history disguised within it. Every place has a history; every person has a past; we, you and I, have our ghosts. –Miles Richardson (9/8/05)

Besides these evident spaces of commemoration, a far more multiple, nebulous and imaginative sense of memory persists in everyday, undervalued, mundane spaces which are not coded in such a way as to espouse stable meanings and encourage regular social practices. –Tim Edensor (2005:139)

On November 17, 2000, the little house under the Thunderbolt roller coaster came down and with it, the Giuliani campaign to Disney-fy New York City swung into full force. For Giuliani and other city officials, the Thunderbolt coaster and the house beneath had come to symbolize the decline of Coney Island and the inability of the city to control the neighborhood's image. However, for residents of Coney Island, the house was a monument to survival (Denson 2002). Dick Zigun called the demolition "an assassination of a piece of history," (Denson 2002:277) while historic preservationists at a recent lecture sited its destruction as a turning point in Coney Island when the city stopped caring about vernacular pasts. It was the last remaining original boardwalk structure. However, the value of the house did not lie in its age, its unique architecture or even in its sheer will to survive. What was lost was, in the words of the house's de-facto tenant Frankie, "an emotional past. When you have a life and a past you get emotionally involved. Who is it valued to?" The house had become not just a part of Frankie's emotional past but the past of every New Yorker and visitor to Coney Island who'd ever wondered with fascination, who lives inside?

The question of emotional value resonates throughout our cities as practices of urban renewal threaten to destroy our stories and legends, our counter-narratives to official history. Where is the place of “emotional pasts” in the landscape of American cities? Boyer writes of the need to reclaim these personal memories, which interrupt the linearity of established urban history:

[Through] our need to establish counter-memories, resisting the dominant coding of images and representations and recovering differences that official memory has erased...we are compelled to create new memory walks through the city, new maps that help us resist and subvert the all-too-programmed and enveloping messages of our consumer culture (1994:28-29).

Similarly, De Certeau's (1984) discussion of myths and legends surrounding urban places argues that it these stories that make cities livable because they are emotionally felt, regardless of their historical accuracy. In order to maintain this “habitability” we must experience the city through stories, wandering through topographies of our own imagining. Pile describes the multiplicity of stories present in cities as the “porosity” of urban space, where “some [stories] are allowed to become real. Others become ghosts; some remain dreams” (2005:15). The stories which are presumably “not allowed” to become real are no less important than those that are and the city needs both to survive. As Dydia DeLyser notes, it is “in part through fantasy that they [tourists] create their realities” (2001:36). What is “real” thus becomes less important than what is meaningful.

De Certeau asserts that these personal stories and legends seek to “diversify” city spaces whereas rumors “totalize,” forming a network of “superstitions” which are not tolerated in the highly encoded, legible city: “Totalitarianism attacks what it quite

correctly calls superstitions, [which] annex to a past or poetic realm a part of the land the promoters of technical rationalities and financial profitabilities had reserved for themselves” (1984:106). As urban authorities struggle to totalize meaning in the built environment, urban dwellers in turn multiply these meanings as they engage with urban sites as emotional places of real and imaginary reverie.

In less regulated urban spaces, the bodily practice of wandering the fragmented urban landscape becomes subtly subversive where “the city becomes a ghost town of memories without a language to articulate them because walking is a transient and evanescent practice” (Pile 1996:226). History opens itself up to inquiry as these fragments are experienced. For Kathleen Stewart, the freedom to wander brings history “into the present as narrative text” (1996:95). Our bodies become sites of storytelling as we shape untraceable pathways through the city, linking the past to the present.

The memories of those who lived in the “little house” under the Thunderbolt and all those who imagined the stories within form what is commonplace in Coney Island: the presence of emotional pasts which transcend linear, official notions of history. These connections are forged through personal experiences of the temporal fabric of the built environment, which stimulate imaginings in a similar manner to Stewart’s discussion of ruins. History is imagined “not as an accomplished fact or a formless tendency but as an occupied space of contingency and desire in which people roam” (Stewart 1996:90).

The Story of Destruction: Absence in the Built Landscape

Coney Island functions as a palimpsest where real and imagined layers of history in the built environment help visitors to insert their own real and imagined pasts. As Hank explains:

I've known Coney Island my whole life so it's almost a strange sensation, because I pass the streets that I remember exactly as they were and I see the way they are now and I know what we're working on for the future, so it's very amalgam of yesterday, today and tomorrow, all at the same time, I live it all. It's just there all the time. It's just churning around and what can we do?

For many of the area's residents the palimpsest lives and breathes, as the neighborhood's history is young enough that it is full of survivors who are emotionally connected to it. This palimpsest is also explored by non-natives where "a visit [to Coney Island] is like an archaeological dig in which you find different civilizations, one on top of another" (Caruso 1999:LI23).

Melissa Baldock writes that "the spirit of Coney Island is strong through both the presence and absence of historic fabric in the landscape" (2003:149). This "absence of historic fabric" is quite literally, vacancy. Coney Island is often experienced viscerally as a landscape of forgetting rather than remembering, where demolition has become a method of "un-remembering" which is physically imposed on the land. As physical structures are demolished, all the pasts contained within them are thus refused a place in official, visible history (see Climo and Cattell 2002, Fullilove 2004).

In many ways, the history of Coney has been one of destruction, with nearly every inch of the neighborhood burned to the ground at some point in time (Denson 2002).



Vacant Lot

This destruction and neglect over the past 40 years has led to a unique situation of vacancy with regard to other city neighborhoods. As Max notes:

What's shocking to me is the level of vacancy. [One building] naturally has decayed over time. You can't have that in any part of the city [except Coney Island]. [The building has] this sign, 'beachfront property available,' and it's faded and it's falling to crap and you can barely read it and it's still there with new buildings right in the back of it.

The landscape appears as discontinuity where the ruins of burnt buildings lay side by side with partially decaying structures and newer structures. Coney Island shatters the notion of linear history as progress in a way that is akin to Stewart and Edensor's studies of ruins whose presence refuses to make sense of the history that has come before:

Lying in the interstices of the regulated city, ruinous (dis)orderings of matter and space lie adjacent to these smoother spaces designed to allay fears of chaos and reinforce epistemological and practical spatial normatives (Edensor 2005:141).

Although Coney is by no means a forgotten wasteland, remaining a vital and lively part of the city, the presence of its various temporal layers which have not been "smoothed"

over disorders and complicates a linear reading of the progress of American city building

The few buildings from turn of the century Coney that remain stand abandoned, undeclared or unexplained in their historical significance. Many have been converted to new uses, as was the case with the Half Moon Hotel, a boardwalk building that has since been demolished. These survivors become places to confront a temporal layering of urban space that is sometimes unsettling. Max describes a visit to the Half Moon Hotel where “residents lived in the old hotel rooms that were there but it was an old folks home so it was like something out of a science fiction movie.” De Certeau refers to such unexplained structures as “shipwrecked histories” which “burst forth within the modernist, massive, homogenous city like slips of the tongue from an unknown, perhaps unconscious, language” (1994:133). Through the presence of these undeclared histories, official fact is translated into the illegible multiplicities of memory:

By eluding the law of the present, these inanimate objects acquire a certain autonomy...they are witnesses to a history that, unlike that of museums or books, no longer has a language. Their histories cease to be pedagogical; they are no longer ‘pacified,’ nor colonized by semantics- as if returned to their existence, wild, delinquent (De Certeau 1994:135).

This physical landscape of vacancy and historical disorder does not allow the visitor to access popular written versions of the area’s history which focus on the social history of immigration and American leisure where Coney was once the “world’s greatest playground.” These “official” historical narratives of the neighborhood often stop around World War II or at the latest in the 1960s with the closing of Steeplechase, the last of the amusement park giants. However, the only coherent declaration of this particular history in the present day built landscape is a handful of turn of the century photos, displayed on

maps along the boardwalk. This static presentation of the history of a turn of the century amusement park is largely overwhelmed by the reality of the landscape which surrounds it.

The story of Coney's decline and marginalization by the city disappears from the books but rises again in the built landscape. As I wander present day Coney, I am faced with a more recent urban history of racism, economic inequality, institutionalized poverty and social injustice, left in pockmarks on the lunar landscape, in vacant lots and towering housing projects. It is what some visitors refer to as a "time warp" where Coney seems to be trapped in a recent past, perceived usually as some time between the 1970s and 1990s, depending on the age and historic knowledge of the person speaking. Here, time becomes cyclical and linear progress questionable. The word "preservation" seems ironic in a neighborhood which has experienced so much demolition. As Giovanna comments, "You haven't preserved the past. What are we preserving?" Preservation is often viewed as the stagnation of remaining in an economic rut.

What is left of turn of the century Coney are not the structures of the large amusement parks, the giants of official history, but vestiges of the small which are preserved through practice rather than through architecture. These are what Max refers to as businesses that are unique for their "human scale" and the human interactions which these permit. Nostalgia is expressed experientially as a longing for a proliferation of these human scale practices. "Coney Island was not just about the big amusement parks, says Captain Jim. "[It was about] a custard stand, a souvenir stand, an arcade." Another former resident comments that what he wants "brought back" through future

development of the area are more of these small boardwalk businesses. The majority of visitors and residents site these kinds of businesses as unique to Coney Island.

The only remaining vestiges of the early amusement area are the Cyclone rollercoaster, the Wonder Wheel, the B and B carousel and the Parachute Jump. Both the Cyclone and the Wonder Wheel are experiential parts of the historical fabric, functioning both as historic structures of architectural and age value and as generators of new memories, emergent through the experiences of current visitors. The past is brought into the present through a sensual experience, which stands opposed to practices of historic re-enactment in its ability to generate new memories that are detached from historicity. The palimpsest lives and breathes as visitors fly through the air, experiencing the same twists and turns of 80 years ago, their own screams blending with the echoes of past screams. Perhaps this is what is meant by the term “living history,” which is often used to describe the area.

The carousel is also valued for its artistic beauty and its age, remaining the last carousel of many that had once been in the area. However, these more static historical values slip away as visitors describe their desire to experience a ride. One visitor begins to discuss the carousel’s historic value and quickly shifts to a story about riding with a friend at the closing of the summer season, where what is special about the structure becomes “calliope music and being the only two riding it.” Sensual experience transcends historic value, linking the past to the present through bodily engagement.



The Parachute Jump

The now defunct Parachute Jump becomes a site of reverie, remaining the last original structure from the three amusement giants of turn of the century Coney. One local artist comments that the jump has become for her like a “promise that [was] never fulfilled” because she never had the chance to experience the functioning ride. In Coney Island, where most of what remains of the historic fabric functions as experiential, the Parachute Jump evokes the ghost of movement, becoming emotionally powerful through the imaginings of those who see it. Some visitors react with fear at the power of the structure saying it looks “dangerous,” while others long for a time when it was still functioning. This perception of movement is the perception of Coney as a place which must generate new memories through a dynamic experience of history.

Dancing Hot Dogs and Incubator Babies: “Official” Spaces of Remembering

The Coney Island Hall of Fame project was revealed amidst fanfare in the summer of 2005, set to the trumpets of a tiny brass band as a girl dressed as a giant hot

dog danced happily across the asphalt. Audience members included everyone from the Brooklyn borough president to a man dressed as a giant rabbit: a local legend that is supposedly a reservoir of Coney historical information and who never appears without his rabbit suit. Here, history was “not some stuffed doll in a closet” in the words of one of the announcers. It was in the process of being created in the open summer air at a human scale, set to the backdrop of the screams of the Cyclone as riders continued to make their own memories. Charles Denson, author and native Coney Islander, spoke at the ceremony of the need for a monument to “the founders of Coney Island.” The “monument,” kooky Coney style, became a funny little wall attached to the side of an amusement trailer, complete with picture posters dedicated to those who “created a Coney Island of the mind”: belly dancers and preemie-baby doctors, hot dog inventors and amusement park luminaries. It was not Coney Island that was honored but Coney *Islands*: all of those that are contained inside a human being’s imagination. The wall is part of a larger project advertised as “Be a part of living history: tell us your stories.” These living histories, transmitted through storytelling, honor living emotional pasts, which are not the property of any one person but of everyone who has memories of Coney Island.

At the ceremony, the official past was brought into the present as something which was public, mobile and celebratory. One resident even suggested the idea of flying banners of the pictures down the boardwalk in a parade of history. Alongside the dancing hot dog another woman performed as Little Egypt, a Midway dancer honored in the Hall of Fame. Her performance was similar to that of Coney’s Friday night burlesque shows,

where history is presented not as an accurate facsimile but as an invocation of the scandalized emotions which were originally stimulated by such performances, interpreted for a modern audience (see Souss 2004).

Similarly, the Coney Island Museum invites explorers to experience vernacular pasts where history is once again “undone” and largely constructed through visitors’ discoveries. If museums are places where history becomes the evidence of our need to tell a coherent story, in the Coney Island museum, as in the neighborhood itself, we are faced with the impossible incoherence of absence. This absence is made playful in found fragments that seem more like a backyard garage sale than a history museum. The past is a lone bumper car, a stray carousel horse, fun house distortion mirrors and a mutoscope reel of a famous elephant electrocution. Amidst the absence of physical relics of Coney’s past, history is sensed rather than stated, translated through residents’ and visitors’ emotions.

At the sideshow and burlesque performances, the past is not a carefully constructed recreation, which searches for historical accuracy, but rather a spirit which emerges through live performance. Artistic director Dick Zigun feels that his role is to keep a “sense” of the past for others where so much is absent, both from the turn of the century carnival atmosphere and from his own past: the experience of Coney in the early 1980s. He describes his attraction to the area as one that linked a personal fascination with circus culture to a present Coney Island where “nothing” was there. In essence, his endeavor as an artist was to bring the presence of historical spirit to its physical absence

in the neighborhood. As Karen comments, the work of Dick Zigun becomes “a link to the past and also, sort of a present and a future.”

Captain Jim’s tours of the area take visitors to places which no longer exist, becoming what might be called “absence” tours as visitors wander a landscape of empty spaces where amusements and buildings once stood. Captain Jim jokes with me about a recent magazine ad which confused these absence tours with what is usually expected from a historic walking tour: “They mis-worded a word in my ad: ‘Go to see Captain Jim’s tours and see the wax museums and bathhouses and restaurants.’ So they come down looking, so where is it?” Faced with absence and incoherence in the built landscape, Coney Island history is told as a story that arises through wanderings of the empty spaces left behind.

“It’s not a place, it’s an ethos”: History as Essence and the Space to Move

If bodies at play multiply the meanings of public space in the city, imaginings once more allow the meanings of urban space to become mobile. What is created is an emergent history, constantly coming into being through the multiplicities of memory. In Cresswell’s study, graffiti becomes visible urban disorder which questions the fixed meaning of urban space. Similarly, our memories and stories invisibly disorder official history and it is through this invisible disordering that Coney moves beyond the sum of its embodied practices and beyond into imagined dreams. The disordering of official history occurs first as Coney Island is perceived as an emotional space where “the memorable is that which can be dreamed about a place. In this place that is palimpsest,

subjectivity is already linked to the absence that structures it as existence and makes it ‘be there’” (De Certeau 1994:109).

Most people I spoke with claimed to know little or nothing about the history of the neighborhood but instead “felt” the presence of history amidst the absence. As one long time resident and game operator said, “There’s a lot of history here. I don’t know it but there’s a lot of it.” Another visitor, who spoke emphatically about the necessity of historic preservation in the area, claimed to know “almost nothing” about its actual history: “Mainly just whatever you can glean off of a postcard.” In the absence of historic fabric in the built environment, visitors often confuse different time periods while still claiming that there is “a lot of history” which needs to be protected. As one young man says, “Well, just judging by the buildings and the character of the rides and all, it was a place that peaked at like the turn of the century, or maybe like sustained itself through the 50s and 60s.” Despite his historical confusion and the fact that little to nothing remains of either turn of the century Coney or 50s and 60s Coney, this desire for preservation becomes a desire to maintain an abstract emotional spirit, a “character.”

Both residents and visitors alike of a variety of ages began using the term “history” interchangeably with words that indicated a more abstract, emotional perception of the past. History became “an essence,” “a spirit,” “magic,” or a “consciousness.” Many simply described it as an intangible “something,” stating, “I don’t know what it is.” One man called the neighborhood “a soup,” explaining that “the flavor is something special.” Although no one seemed to be able to articulate what exactly “it” was, they knew what it was not, reacting viscerally against development

plans for indoor malls or Disney-esque amusements which didn't fit with this perceived spirit.

This presence is not only perceived as an intangible "spirit" of place but as an emotional strength whose presence cannot be destroyed. As Piper describes:

Coney Island cannot shake its history. Coney can't escape its history, so that will be intact, cause that's what makes it what it is. You're in it for a second, like you have this experience. I don't think they'll be able to shake that or ruin that. No matter what they build, they're not going to be able to get rid of like the essence of the history. That will remain. They can't kill it. There's too many survivors yet in the mix and people have endured worse.

She describes the "essence" of Coney's history through her active experience of attending the sideshow where what she experiences is not the static history of the built environment but an emotional continuity of Coney as a unique experience which remains "alive." For the history of Coney Island to be "killed" it has to be living and its essence lies beyond the built landscape, in the experiences of those who live it. "I just think that something has to remain that's true and that's real so that you can like, touch the past," comments Karen. "I'm just so afraid we're losing our experience." For Karen, history becomes the remembrance of a recent past that encouraged sensual immediacy. She fears the loss of this "experience" as people increasingly choose to avoid sensual contact with the city, favoring private chlorinated swimming pools over Coney Island's ocean. For some, this experience becomes almost spiritual. Giovanna describes the energy she feels in the neighborhood:

I think it [the spirit] would permeate no matter what. I think the spirit is too strong, really. I don't think anyone could really take away from it. I think that it's just here. It's like a vortex of energy that just comes along with possibly magnetic lay lines that are crossing each other; you know what I'm saying? It is. It's very much here.

The spirit of the neighborhood is often described as cyclical. A man in his mid-twenties, whom I met at Ruby's Bar, comments that no matter what development comes to the neighborhood, Coney will always return to the way it is for him, as part of an inevitable cycle where he experiences an almost forgotten culture. This concept of cyclical history is paired with the notion of a spirit which will either rise again or which has never really died, where "there is something there that refuses to perish" (Activity 1985:20). The conceptualization of history as cyclical contrasts starkly with linear notions of progress and it is this cyclical imaginary which allows Coney's history to become porous, infused with personal identities and pasts.

This spirit permeates the collective unconscious of city dwellers, even those who have never been to Coney Island. One young man reacts almost violently to the suggestion that developers are poised to transform the current landscape: "I've never been but I feel so impassioned. It's not a place, it's an ethos." For some visitors, the experience or idea of Coney Island comes closer to a belief system than a location on a map and it is this belief in the transcendence of Coney's essence or spirit which allows visitors to connect to their own perceptions of the past.

Remembering the past becomes an emotional experience rather than a pedagogical act of viewing. The fixed parts of the past which remain, many of which are land-marked structures, become secondary to an engagement with history as an intangible collection of stories. As one visitor says, "A thing can't be a landmark [the Cyclone]. The whole thing [neighborhood] is a landmark." The "whole thing," an untraceable emotional experience, opposes itself to "the thing," an object that can be visually fixed in

the landscape. In a discussion about the preservation of Coney in the face of potential development, a regular to Cha Cha's bar yells, "This is our landmark!" The bar itself, as a place of emotional investment and personal memory, retains an historical value that is undefinable and emergent, countering more traditional means of preservation.

Where Your Great-great Grandparents First Kissed: Sensing History as Emotional Presence

While "visual understanding or interpretation is primarily stimulated by presence," writes DeLyser, "imaginative understanding, in contrast, is stimulated by absence" (2001:29). In Coney Island, it is through this imaginative understanding that official history becomes haunted as visitors bring the presence of their imaginings to the gaps in the physical landscape. As De Certeau notes, "Places people live in, are like presences of diverse absences" (1984:108). Absence in the physical landscape of Coney Island transforms "official history" into personal connections with a negotiated past.

"Your imagination fills in what your eyes miss," says one Brooklyn tour book of Coney Island (Freudenheim and Wiener 2004:120). Through storytelling, gaps are filled in with imaginings and Coney Island "becomes" whatever visitors want it to be. These imaginings seldom fill in official textbook events in the social history of immigration or the history of America's first amusement area, but instead tell of perceived emotional pasts. A young man likens this "filling in" to the remaking of a myth of Coney Island for children:

You've always gotta remake the myth over and over again, like kids'll ask you, like little kids that don't know what is Coney Island. Then you gotta like recreate the myth and be like 'Coney Island is,' and then you make it up on the spot.

The metaphor of the little house and its emotional past relates directly to the way in which visitors perceive the past as they travel through the Coney Island landscape, filling in the presence of bodies which are no longer there. “It was like going through an old house that hadn’t been lived in, in years,” says one visitor, while Max expresses similar feelings as he wanders through the old neighborhood: “There was one house that I went past that definitely felt like there was a human presence there. Not like ghosts but like it has a history. You feel connection.” History is actively created through the freedom to wander as visitors discover versions of the past through fragments of buildings. “I find these little places,” says Karen, “these little buildings that are left and they transport me right back to the past.”

Imagining begins on the subway ride down where an ad reads, “Come to Coney Island. Visit the birthplace of summer.” On the long ride down from the South Bronx, East Harlem and Queens, visitors are prepared for a pilgrimage to the birthplace of *their* summer. It is at once the present experience of this summer as a site of new memory making and the memory of all summers that have come before. The advertisement does not read, “Visit the birthplace of the amusement industry” or “the hot dog or the rollercoaster,” nor does it read, “Visit the beginnings of the social history of immigration.” On a practical level, this is because little remains in the built landscape to indicate these histories. However, it is more importantly because Coney Island continues to be part of the living histories of New Yorkers, an active site of experience and memory making. This experience of summer is what Baldock (2003) terms a kind of instant

nostalgia, emergent in the Coney Island experience since its beginnings as a release valve for working class New Yorkers.

Emotional pasts are subsequently accessed through return visits to Coney, often experienced through the act of walking and roaming where history is negotiated on foot and layers of the palimpsest are brought into living relief. After her first visit just a few years ago, Piper says she “never missed coming back to Coney Island. I always would take the train out to Coney and re-experience the walk.” Piper remakes *her* Coney Island as she had first experienced it: the hot day in late spring in her sundress where “there was just something about that visit, strolling on the boardwalk and the way people interacted with us, the happiness, the joy.” For Max, walking becomes the ability to return to the neighborhood he always knew. Through the walk, he travels into his own recent past:

It was still like it was New York in the 80s, New York in the 70s. It looked exactly the same. It’s weird cause while other neighborhoods grow and transition, they [Coney Island and Brighton Beach] kind of always stay the same, like they’re the working class neighborhood you remember. And even though it changes, it’s the neighborhood you remember. It’s hard to say what it is exactly.

For New Yorkers who’ve experienced Coney Island as children, emotional connections are either maintained or rejected through these return visits. One visitor goes as far as to say that “you come here to find your childhood. It was a treat to come to Coney.” The experience of the past becomes quite literally *his* past as the history of Coney Island is transformed through memory. Former borough president Jeannette Gadson expresses a similar connection to her past: “I’m not giving up on my memories because Coney Island is what Brooklyn is all about... You can’t give up on your own history” (Barstow 2000:B6). “Why should we keep it?” asks Karen. “It’s our history and

we've got nothing if we can't remember the past." History is experienced at the ground level where it belongs to "us."



Former site of the Thunderbolt rollercoaster

The need to seek an emotional connection with the past is also evident in those who find themselves disappointed, not identifying with Coney because it is too different from what they remember as children, either of Coney Island in particular or of boardwalks elsewhere. For those who have lived through the massive destruction and demolition of the neighborhood, the absences in the landscape can be painful. Dick Zigun comments that he was able to come to Coney as a visionary because he wasn't as emotionally involved with these past versions of Coney: "I was able to help find the future of Coney Island as opposed to a New Yorker who saw his childhood playground burned and you know, go through all kinds of horror...that would be disillusioning." One interviewee, with visceral responses to what he calls the "trashiness" of Coney,

ultimately relays that Coney Island's boardwalk is "sort of like that [the boardwalk in Jersey]. But I guess I have better memories of the one in Jersey."

The lines between personal pasts and the pasts of others blur as visitors forge these emotional connections. As a young Puerto Rican man told me, "You come here to identify with the past, to see where your great-great grandparents first kissed. When there's a mall here, what will you see?" What you "see" now is absence, the empty holes where human encounters once happened. Regardless of the fact that this man's great-great grandparents, as Puerto Ricans, were most likely never in Coney Island, his perception of Coney is of a place where personal pasts matter. Another man echoes this, stating that if "you kill this [the current experience of Coney], you kill the history of Brooklyn," in response to the suggestion that enclosed amusements and malls will be built along Coney's boardwalk. For both of these men the building of a mall would take this imagining away, filling in the gaps of perceived emotional pasts and creating a legible presence that is imbued with non-negotiable meaning. The absence in Coney Island is akin to Edensor's "alterity of the past" where the impossibility to claim the past whole leads to an experience where "traces of our past selves leak out from a present in which we have tried to contain and encode the past" (2005:152). Our own memories and others' memories are blurred as we sense places of human presence.

The sensing of personal pasts is juxtaposed to the selling of history as a commodity which is packaged as authentic experience. On a practical level, the absence of dense historic fabric in the neighborhood renders heritage tourism nearly impossible to market. Instead, Coney unconsciously sells dreams and experiences which are unique, as

they return visitors to a recent past of “real” experiences which contrast the simulacra of the hyper-real. “You can’t buy history,” one man says angrily to me, in response to talk of possible plans for a mall. History, as he expresses it, is not something that can be encoded in architecture but something which remains mobile through an emotional and intangible engagement with place.

History as personal myth is explored through music at Ruby’s and Cha Cha’s boardwalk bars. Inside Cha Cha’s, “Home of Wild Women and Wise Guys,” piña coladas are served in neon pink cups which read “Summer of 1998,” while Roxanne the bartender grins gap toothed and talks about the 1980s as if they were a distant land where she “was a girl with some big balls.” Most days, the sound system is tuned into a 70s radio program where the DJ croons repeatedly, “It was all so simple then.” Music is not chosen here to create a nostalgic atmosphere of the past to be marketed to tourists as spectacle. Instead, it becomes a way for both bartenders and patrons to claim their own recent pasts: when their bikinis looked hotter, before their wife left them, or maybe, just last summer, when things seemed a little brighter.

In both bars, the “time warp” is not imposed by the uneven development of the urban fabric; it is chosen by the patrons who cozy up to the bar and wallow in their own pasts, dropping coins in the jukebox to search for the soundtrack of their lives. One patron looks up from his drink, glassy eyed, mumbling, “Back in the day...music now sucks,” as he shoves more dollars into the jukebox in search of the Frank Sinatra song that “brings back memories.” At Ruby’s “Old Thyme” bar (actually only five years old), recent photos of the 80s and 90s mix with older black and white shots of early Coney

Island's amusement past. Even these early photos are grounded in the actual experience of older survivors, notably the recently deceased Ruby himself, grinning in a variety of poses which fascinate visitors and comfort locals. Ruby's feels "old" because it is weighted with the recent emotional pasts of all those who have experienced the bar itself as a site of memory making. As Pat de Angelis writes (www.placematters.net):

Stepping into Ruby's from the Boardwalk is a bit like stepping into a cave where you can meet the past and present life of Coney Island...It is not McDonalds. The bar, the tables, the old sofa in the back by the jukebox are worn with wear by many, many folks.

Here, we sense the presence of bodies and thus, the presence of their stories. The worn furniture refuses to rid itself of the marks of time, the marks of bodies. We are present inside both our own story and all the stories of those who've come before.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

“The world is round, or so we are told”

“The Concept-City is decaying,” writes De Certeau (1984:95). In its wake, we are left with the city of “urban practices”: the emotional and everyday ways in which we live and wander the urban fabric. In the recognition of the decay of the visually ordered concept-city, research in urban geography must shift accordingly to a valorization of the practices through which city inhabitants make space. Through a return to more ethnographic, emotional work on cities, we may move towards an understanding of urban places as sites of complex, negotiated meanings. “One must awaken the stories that sleep in the streets” (De Certeau 1994: 142) in order to uncover the subconscious and often invisible work that makes the city habitable. The meanings of Coney Island, and any urban space, cannot be fully experienced or understood except in the living.

In the post-industrial American city, the question of what urban space means seems far less important than how it is lived. Living the city becomes a dynamic struggle between meanings, which is not always political and thus must be examined in more everyday ways. In this thesis, I have attempted to understand some of the lived space of Coney Island as it relates to the concept of an illegible city, examining practices through which the neighborhood becomes a place of tourism, play and memory. This illegibility, I argue, is our way to talk back to visual efforts to symbolically contain the city. The city moves beyond a text and into a way of being, gaining the “poetic overlay” which De Certeau deems necessary for habitability.

This study of everyday practice is vital to urban space as it is increasingly given over to totalization and homogenization in the name of financial profit and the control of historical meaning:

The smoothing over of space also involves the erasure or commodification of the past, and fosters the myth that urban development is progressive; and in so doing, there is a forgetting that things might be otherwise, that elements of the past might have conspired to forge an alternative present (Edensor 2005:141).

The “smoothing over of space” is increasingly present in the city which constructs meaning solely on the basis of visual order, attempting to encode ways of being into cement and stone. This process attempts to make us forget what the city could be as we are told what the city should be. Or, in the words of one Coney Island burlesque performer, “The world is round, or so we are told.” Through a proliferation of everyday practices in less regulated city spaces like Coney Island, we challenge and reconstruct established meanings of city space, allowing for both a renegotiation of history and a chance to multiply the possibilities of the present.

In Chapter 1, I emphasized Coney Island’s urban-ness as a quality which necessitates different kinds of performances as tourist fantasy mixes with urban reality. The sensual experience of urban-ness moves tourists beyond more voyeuristic encounters with the city and it is through this sensual urban-ness that tourists are released from scripted roles, moving into chosen, improvised experiences of Coney Island. In many urban spaces, the aestheticization of the city valorizes visual order over the real needs of city people, taming the sensual into a stomachable tableau for outside visitors. However, in Coney Island, the city rises again and we cannot deny its inconsistencies or our desire

for more complicated urban experiences. This city can never be relegated to the static, visual act of ‘just looking.’

In Chapter 2, this visual transcendence is expressed through the playful practice of bodies, which both defines and negotiates the concept of public space.

Gestures are the true archives of the city, if one understands by ‘archives’ the past that is selected and reused according to present custom. They remake the urban landscape everyday. They sculpt a thousand pasts that are perhaps no longer nameable and that structure no less their experience of the city (De Certeau 1994:142).

In Coney Island, these gestures are playful, migrational and uncontainable, seeping between the cracks of the surveilled city through the free play of visitors and traveling practices of commerce. These playful performances not only help to maintain Coney Island’s public-ness but also allow visitors to explore the multiple identities of their bodies in the city through spectacles which encourage their participation. Through public art, these performances blur the boundaries between public and private space, creating a public realm that is celebratory and mobile. The emergent performances of public space in Coney Island are not on the level of the hyper-real but the real, transcending the notion of the simulacrum, as regular bodies become spectacle through a reciprocal exchange of being together.

In Chapter 3, the illegibility of the city moves from the body to the imagination as visitors translate official history into personal myth through imaginings and storytelling. These stories arise from the absence of official declarations in the built landscape, letting visitors re-imagine official history through continued inquiry. In Coney Island, visitors are free to roam in history, searching for a place for the little house under the

rollercoaster to stand not as a museum relic of a time gone by, but as an active site of dreaming and imagining. As Stewart (1996) notes, the process of roaming through unregulated spaces is one in which history constantly emerges. As we encounter gaps and inconsistencies, our bodies and minds constantly revise and re-tell, recovering the history of spaces “on the side of the road.”

The city is indeed haunted. It is haunted by the specter of urban decline, which rises behind efforts to symbolically assert linear progress. It is haunted by our bodies as we wander beyond the boundaries suggested, creating new networks of meaning which perform outside of regulated space. It is haunted by each of our pasts as we bring them into being, wandering and storytelling, re-writing history so that we may multiply the possibilities of the present. These hauntings are “the spaces where absent presences make themselves felt through the sense of space which we intuit. If such places are cleaned up and subject to interpretive coding... [they will become] partially exorcised of the ghosts which contact us” (Edensor 2005:151).

Coney Island seems poised for immense change as potential investment once again calls into question the meaning of urban space. On a practical level, the factors involved in the redevelopment of Coney Island are vastly different from Manhattan’s Times Square and South Street Seaport. However, on a symbolic level the struggle to contain Coney Island and thus the “urban” in the city has echoed throughout the history of all of these spaces. Coney Island may very well experience a period of homogenization on par with the new Times Square. However, if this is the case I believe that the practice of “Coney Island” will travel elsewhere, as our need to reclaim city

space and haunt official meanings remains a constant. If history has taught us anything about Coney Island, it is that there is a spirit that refuses to die. Ultimately it is the spirit of less regulated space, the search for one last corner where we can roam free, remembering the possibilities of the city. The city is always about possibilities, where our own pasts overlap with imagined pasts and living becomes a constant process of reinvention. Or as Piper says, “I have a linear side that can function in the world but the other side of me is how do you get that ace in your pocket? That little thing way inside that makes it all like this is actually a huge wonder out here. And Coney kind of brings me that.”



Bumblebees await the summer season

Where Will We Send Our Goodbyes, This Time?

I learned to put my lipstick on straight
at the bathroom sink of the Seahorse Motel,
where the tap water tasted
like Baltimore and my jeans got covered in salt
thirteen, all leg and good skin
I'd claim my body with
each step over broken boards
strutting and snarling and scaring little boy's mothers
remaking this strip of land into 10,000 miles of sand
busted up pinball machines flashing in my wake

They say the town shut down
because the cars got too fast
nobody stuck around
no one knew anymore,
how to face up to the ocean
standing shoulder to shoulder,
They say the town shut down
because it shuddered and wept in the face of
Mr. History with his thick thigh muscles
pistol whipping all the palm readers
It's better in black and white
when I'm so dark I speak my mother tongue
I've got history in my skin and everybody's looking
those girls from Jersey, you know
Eye-talians, dark as smoke by July
they like speed, loosen up in the backseat
like twisting the cap off the bottle
in the loneliness of late afternoon
She kept the low light on when she dealt the cards
shooting craps straight from the hip, luck spilling from her lips
from a Memphis porch to Atlantic City
we'd pull her from the casino at sunset
riding home backwards
I'd glow with the possibility of
the day I'd become
the painted ladies I thought were tigers,
the night held prisoner in a square glass the color of amber,
a sadness greater than all the empty lots in the center of this town

That day they shut the town for us
an angel appeared from under the boardwalk

tattooed and dripping, high on it all
“You like black girls? You need a place to sleep,
you want a place to sleep?”
That night we slept on turquoise colored myth
we slept on burnt buildings
we slept on song
folded in on each other, like origami planes, wet and useless

Rocks filled my mouth
the day he died
on the beach half a world away
we ate tomatoes whole
and I looked for every place he'd ever been
every place in between
was mine instead

That day, they moved the town inside a conch shell
and we listened for the rushing sound that masquerades as the sea
Where will we send our goodbyes this time?
I'll meet you in the street where they tore down the signs
I'll dance with fake flamingos, blind and circling
send a message up the drainpipe with the hermit crab
that ran away when I was six
put my lipstick on real straight
listening for the sound of hope in the ice
hitting the bottom of a glass
like the last rocks on earth down a laundry shoot

You ask me what it's worth
It's my story and I need it
It's my palm sized fortune and the sand in my teeth
up and down this coast
as they strip you clean and rob you blind
It's all I've got

They say one day the ocean will claim all that there is
of the places we've been

- Bess Matassa, April 2005

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Vita

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Bess and a pig- shaped trash receptacle, Coney Island